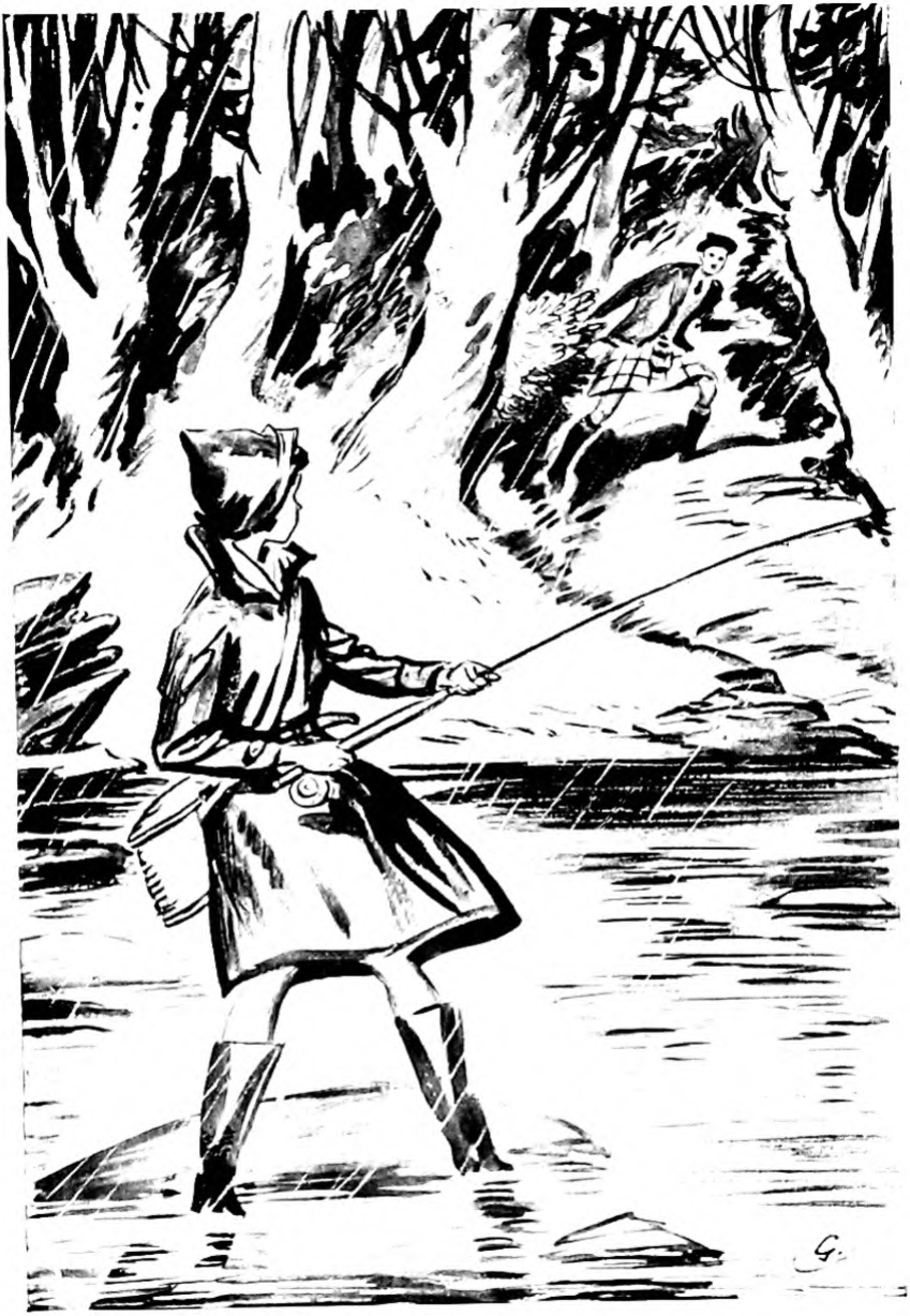
ALISON'S EASTER ADVENTURE

BLACKIE & SON LIMITED
16/18 William IV Street, Charing Cross, LONDON, W.C.2
17 Stanhope Street, GLASGOW

BLACKIE & SON (INDIA) LIMITED
103/5 Fort Street, BOMBAY

BLACKIE & SON (CANADA) LIMITED
TORONTO



"IT WAS THE MAN SHE HAD SEEN ON THE GOLF COURSE"

Page 72

Frontispiece

ALISON'S EASTER ADVENTURE

BY

SHEILA STUART

Author of "Alison's Highland Holiday" "Well done Alison!" &c.

Illustrated by Gervase

GOVT GIRLS COLLEGE
10797

BLACKIE & SON LIMITED
LONDON AND GLASGOW

Printed in Great Britain by Blackie & Son, Ltd., Glasgow

Contents

CHAP. Page

I. "WHEN THE CAT'S AWAY——" - - - - 9

II. TROUBLE WITH HAMISH - - - - - - 28

III. THE COLONEL IN THE YELLOW KILT - - - 44

IV. RUMOUR OF A MASTER CROOK - - - - - 61

V. THE GOLF COMPETITION - - - - - 77

VI. IS THE COLONEL A CROOK? - - - - - 92

VII. MYSTERY IN THE LIBRARY - - - - - 107

VIII. ALISON STUMBLES ON A SECRET - - - - 122

IX. MEETING THE COLONEL'S WIFE - - - - 140

X. MIDNIGHT IN THE CHURCHYARD - - - - 161

XI. LOCKED OUT! - - - - - - - 177

XII. THE SECRET OF THE LIBRARY - - - - - 194

XIII. THE TREASURE IS FOUND - - - - - 215

XIV. MAROONED ON THE ISLAND - - - - - 233

XV. PLANNING ANOTHER MIDNIGHT PLOY - - - 249

For Effie,
with my Love

Illustrations

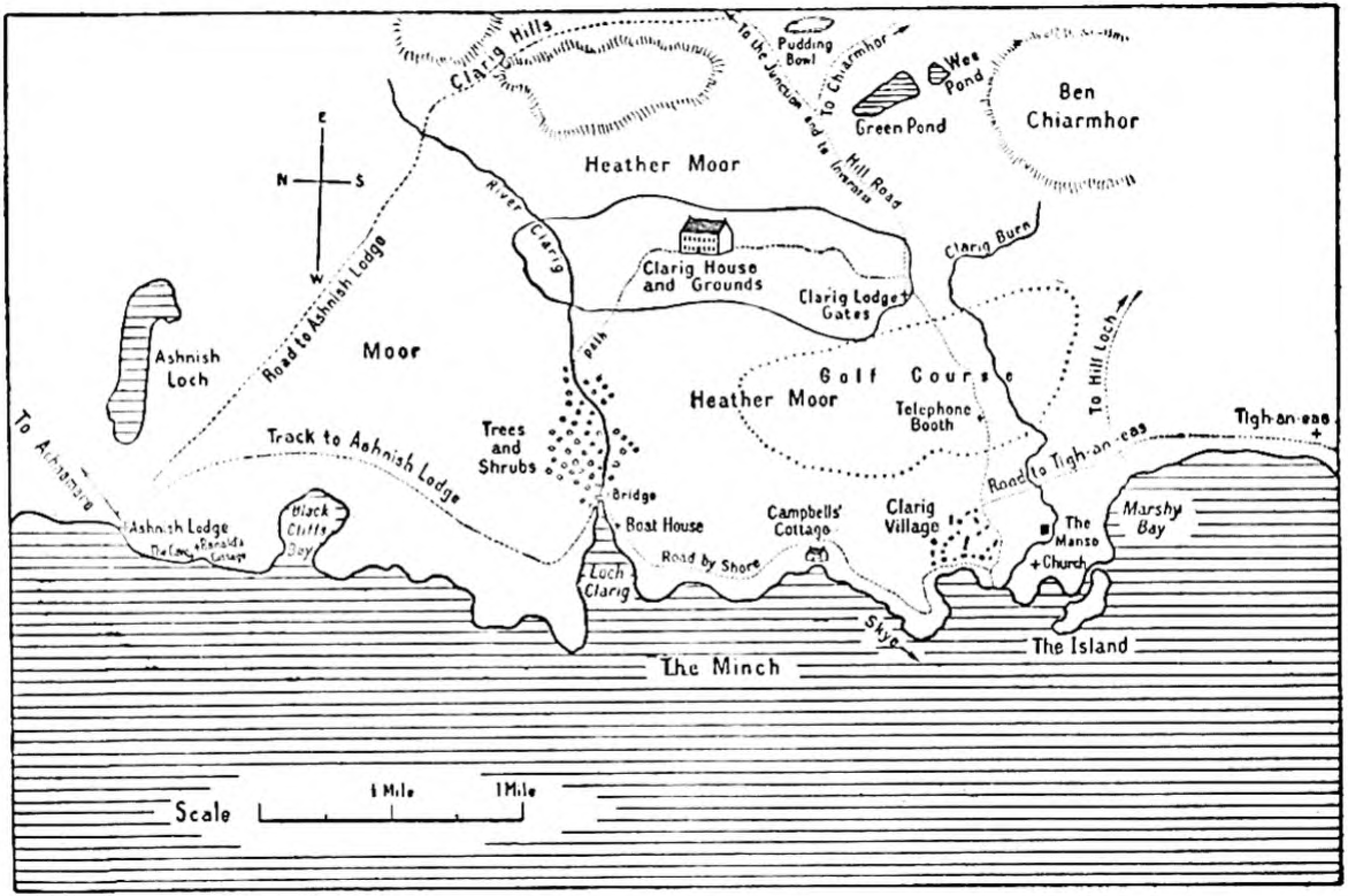
Facing Page

IT WAS THE MAN SHE HAD SEEN ON THE GOLF COURSE *Frontispiece*

" I'VE BEEN WAITING HERE FOR YOU FOR HOURS " - - - 128

" THERE'S SOMEBODY ELSE ON THE BEACH " - - - - 176

" THROUGH THERE—THAT'S WHERE WE GO " - - - - 208


Clarig Hills
To the Junction and to Inverata
Pudding Bowl
To Chiarmhor
Wee Pond
Green Pond
Ben Chiarmhor
Hill Road
E
N
S
W
Heather Moor
River Clarig
Clarig House and Grounds
Clarig Burn
Clarig Lodge Gates
Ashnish Loch
Road to Ashnish Lodge
Moor
path
Golf Course
Heather Moor
Telephone Booth
To Hill Loch
Tigh-an-eas
To Achnamara
Track to Ashnish Lodge
Trees and Shrubs
Bridge
Boat House
Campbells' Cottage
Clarig Village
Road to Tigh-an-eas
Marshy Bay
The Manse
Church
Ashnish Lodge
The Cave
Ranald's Cottage
Black Cliffs Bay
Road by Shore
Loch Clarig
Skye
The Island
The Minch
Scale
½ Mile
1 Mile

THE COUNTRY AROUND CLARIG

Alison's Easter Adventure

CHAPTER I

"When the Cat's away——"

Alison Campbell stood outside the french window of the Cottage and gazed dreamily out to sea. The April sun was unusually warm and there was no wind at all, but the cool crispness in the air was a reminder that it was still spring and that summer was some way ahead. It was heavenly to think of the coming weeks. She sighed happily.

This was the first time she and her brother, Niall, had returned home for the holidays to find only Kirsty, the family friend and maid, there, and although the other members of the family were expected within a few days it felt a little strange for them to be in sole possession.

" Hi, Alison, come and give me a hand with this thing!" yelled Niall. So reluctantly she turned away from the picture before her of dancing sea and colourful sand and rocks, and from her mental picture of the fun they always had at Clarig in the holidays, and went round the side of the house to the tool-shed. Niall was squatting on the floor, struggling to mend the tube of Alison's bicycle tyre.

" Hang on to it while I trail it through the water. Dash the thing, it's still leaking. A foul waste of a perfectly good morning. And it was your own fault, Alison. I told you to look out for that broken bottle——"

" You didn't tell me till I was just on it."

" Well, you might have seen it for yourself."

A shadow fell across the doorway, and Alison glanced up as the tubby little figure of Kirsty appeared. She was dressed in her outdoor things and, for so pleasant a morning, she wore an odd assortment of clothes that included wool-lined boots, three scarves in different colours, and fur-backed gloves, all presents at one time or another from the Campbells. Kirsty had been at the Cottage far longer than any of the young Campbells could remember. She had a shrewd, sometimes a sharp tongue, but she was kindness itself and they one and all adored her.

" Hello, Kirsty," said Alison. " I hardly recognized you all dressed up."

Her faded blue eyes beamed on them both, and her apple-red cheeks seemed to be beaming too. " I have left your sandwiches and the thermos on the hall chest and the supper is set, though I am hoping I will be back before then. Now, you are sure you will be all right?"

Niall drew himself up to his full height of five foot eight and grinned at her affectionately. " Kirsty—you old clucking hen! 'Course we'll be okay. Why shouldn't we?"

" No reason at all, I suppose, except that your name is Campbell."

" Ha! That's a nasty crack."

" Not at all," she said firmly. " Mischief and Trouble are your middle names. And when your uncle and

Miss Mary are not here, it is myself that is responsible for you."

"If anything happens to us it's not your fault, Kirsty," said Alison.

"Nothing must happen to you——"

"Nothing will. Don't you worry," said Niall. "By the time we get this beastly puncture mended it won't be worth going out."

Kirsty smoothed her fur gloves and still stood there as if she were unwilling to go, then pointed to a fold of Alison's kilt resting in a pool of dirty water. "Tsch! Tsch! Your good kilt!"

"It's only my old one. Don't fuss, Kirsty."

"You'll miss your bus if you don't scram, and that'll burst your day off completely," said Niall.

Kirsty shook her head calmly. "I have plenty of time." She smoothed her gloves once more, patted her scarves, and at last turned away. "I will be off, then. Be sure you lock the back door."

"Must we?" said Alison. "We never used to lock the doors."

"We never used to have burglaries," reminded Niall.

"Only one. And it wasn't a real one. Just the professor."

Kirsty sniffed. "It was real enough at the time. You had a very white face that night, Miss Alison, I can tell you."

"Oh, fudge!" said Alison.

"And when I am in charge of the Cottage the door will be locked." The pink feather in her hat was nodding with agitation and Alison said soothingly: "'Course it will, Kirsty. We were only teasing. I'll lock it myself." She gave Kirsty's shoulder a little pat. "Have a nice time and forget about us."

Kirsty looked relieved. "I think I've left everything all right."

"You'll find you've left yourself as well, if you don't get a move on," said Niall.

"Ach now, Master Niall!" And with a wave of her hand she padded off along the path to the gate.

The Campbells turned their attention again to the tyre. "If you ask me, there's more than one puncture here," growled Niall. "Really! I might as well be at school. This kind of morning makes me thoroughly browned-off."

"Sorry. I'd mend it myself if I could——"

"Maybe you could if you wanted to. But it would take you about a week——"

"Well, I didn't want to have a puncture. And I'm sure that tube's rotten. There have been several in it already. That's the worst of a bike. You don't have punctures in cars nearly so often."

He grinned suddenly. "Shall I give you a car for your next birthday?"

She smiled broadly. "Oh, Niall, wouldn't it be smashing if we had one—one of our own, I mean?"

"Would you like to know something?"

"What?"

He sat back on his hunkers. "This is strictly off the record. Mum's the word." She stood waiting and he said impressively: "I *can* drive a car!"

"You can? But how——? When——?"

"When Lanky's dad came to school at half term he had his car with him—it's exactly the same as Uncle's and he was teaching Lanky to drive. He'd got a licence for him and everything, and he said if I'd been old enough he'd have got one for me too——"

"And did you drive his car?"

Niall hesitated. "Well—I was there when he was explaining all about the gears. I heard all he said to Lanky and, of course, I've often watched Uncle and Hamish. It's all frightfully simple really."

"Wonder if I could drive?"

He grinned. "Idiot! Of course not. Not yet anyway, and you need a mechanical brain. Still, I could show you how the gears work in our car."

"If Uncle said we could."

He made a gesture of impatience. "If Uncle had been a sport he'd have let me have a shot long ago——"

"But how could you? Not till you're seventeen."

"Oh, he could have got round that somehow. I don't mean him to let me drive as a general rule, but now and again when we're out I think he might let me have a go. Heaps of boys in my form can drive and some of them are younger than I am."

"It's perhaps a bit difficult for Uncle," Alison said thoughtfully. "With our not having parents and his having to bring us all up. And he's jolly decent with most things."

By now he had mended the tube and was pumping up the tyre. He screwed on the cap and stood up. "There now. Say 'thank you' to your kind brother."

"So I do," she said, making a face at him.

They went inside to collect the picnic things and as they crossed the hall she said: "Isn't it quiet with nobody at home except us?" She glanced up at the old grandfather clock. "What a loud tick it's got!"

He grinned at her. "The only time I notice its tick is when we come creeping downstairs in the night when everyone's asleep."

"When we *came* down," she corrected him. "Those adventures are finished. For me at any rate."

" At times you are a positive wet, Alison."

" At times you are——"

" No nasty cracks now! Remember who's been toiling and moiling and mending your blinking bike." He picked up the packages Kirsty had left ready for them. " Well, here we are, all set."

Alison and Niall were the youngest of a family of four. Mary, the eldest, was a medical student at Edinburgh with one more year to go, Hamish was learning engineering in Glasgow, and they made their home here at Clarig, a tiny village on the west coast of Sutherlandshire, with their uncle, George Campbell. Officially he had retired but he was still attached to the Intelligence Service, and periodically he went off on mysterious hush-hush trips lasting for weeks at a time. The young Campbells were not encouraged to ask where he went or what he was doing, and his absences were never discussed at the Cottage.

But of late years part of Mr. Campbell's work had lain around Clarig, for in this out-of-the-way spot there had been some very strange happenings connected with a gang of crooks. In those adventures Alison and Niall had played an important part. In doing this they had learned the importance of being able to keep a secret.

Although Alison and Niall were the only two of school age, all the Campbells got on very well together. Both Mary and Hamish fished and golfed and bathed and climbed with their young brother and sister, and even Mr. Campbell was almost as keen on these things as they were.

It was lucky they were on such good terms with each other, for there were few young people in the neighbourhood. Their chief friends were the MacLeods, who lived at a farm, Tigh-an-eas, a mile or two down the coast, and Shona Lessing, the rather spoiled niece of Sir Angus Forbes, who owned Clarig House and most of the land round about.

Everybody envied the Campbells their cottage. It was perched on a promontory above the sea—indeed, the beach was on the other side of the garden wall, and they had two small rowing boats that were kept in a small anchorage of their own. In addition to this they had a motor-boat, the *Clan Campbell*, that belonged exclusively to Alison and Niall. This had been given to them by Sir Angus and it was still kept in the laird's boathouse in Loch Clarig, the sea loch, about half a mile distant from the Cottage.

From the front windows of the house you could see nothing but a strip of sandy beach interspersed with rocks, and beyond that a great stretch of sea, and the back windows looked up the glen to the golf course recently laid out by Sir Angus, to Clarig House behind, and to the Clarig Hills behind that again. There was always something to do at Clarig, but recently golf, fishing, swimming, climbing and the rest had partly given place to a different kind of excitement.

It was known that some jewels and money had been hidden by smugglers somewhere in the district a long time ago, and through his Intelligence work, Mr. Campbell had discovered that members of a notorious gang of criminals had determined to find them. Some of the jewels had been traced by Niall and Alison and with their help several of the crooks had actually been caught. But all the gems had not been discovered, and Mr. Campbell believed that this secret would never be solved and that Clarig had seen the last of the crooks.

Niall frankly hoped his uncle was wrong. He took an intelligent interest in detective work and it fascinated him to work on clues and follow up trails. He was not alone in this, for Alison worked with him, but while he exulted in danger and hairbreadth escapes, in her heart she really liked best to spend her leisure either fishing the river or lazing on the beach with a book. These exciting adventures with Niall always scared her, but she was kept going by the fear that one day he might take her at her word and go off on his own without her, so perhaps she enjoyed the excitement more than she thought she did!

"When is Shona due to arrive at Clarig?" Niall asked, as they fastened on their rucksacks.

"Don't know. End of the week, I think." She locked the door and placed the key under a broken flower-pot as instructed by Kirsty.

"Thought she was coming sooner somehow. Oh, well——" Niall was not overfond of Shona.

"'For this relief much thanks: 'tis bitter cold,
And I am sick at heart.'"

"They're always telling us at school to be accurate —I've heard you say the same thing yourself. It is *not* bitter cold."

He had gone ahead and had wheeled out the cycles. He gave a sharp exclamation. "It may not be bitter cold, but I *am* sick at heart. Look at that beastly tyre! As flat as a pancake."

"Oh, Niall—what a shame! What'll we do?"

"Don't know. Unless you borrow Mary's."

"No, I can't do that. She made me promise I wouldn't after that time I fell and smashed one of the pedals."

"Mary is a fuss pot. Ring up Sir Angus and ask if you could have Shona's."

She shook her head. "No use. She keeps it in England and only brings it up here for the holidays."

"Along with her yacht and her car and her horse and other necessities," said Niall, with heavy sarcasm.

"Well, it looks as if we just can't go."

There was a sudden sparkle in his eyes. "It looks as if we can't go—*on our bikes.*"

"What d'you mean by that?"

"It means for one thing that I'm not trying to mend that puncture again." He pushed the cycles inside the shed, closed the door and walked round to the garage.

"There aren't any bikes in there——"

"I am no longer interested in bikes," he said, grinning, as he opened the garage doors. Alison watched him, caught that dark glint in his expression that betokened some wild plan.

"Niall—what *are* you going to do?"

Without replying he climbed into the driving seat. The self-starter whirred. Then again. "Engine's cold."

"What *are* you doing, Niall?"

"With your excellent eyesight I should have thought that would have been obvious. Where's that starting handle?" He leapt out, but after some energetic turning the engine still refused to start. He leaned against the bonnet, puffing.

"Let me have a try."

"If I can't do it, how d'you expect to?"

"Listen—what is it Uncle does sometimes when it won't go? He sits and wiggles something on the dashboard and Hamish uses the handle."

"Oh, I know. You mean the strangler. If I work it from here do you think you could turn the handle?"

She did her best but still nothing happened. The engine remained dead. "I had no idea this thing was so hard to turn," said Alison. " It looks so easy. There's plenty of petrol, I suppose?"

" Mm. I looked. See, Alis, you come in here and move this thing back and forward and I'll have another go at the handle."

Then at last the engine spluttered a little. Stopped. Spluttered again, and then all at once it was ticking over sweetly and smoothly. He adjusted the needle and she got out of the car. " Ha! There we are. Come on. Hop in."

But she stood staring at him. " You can't mean we're going out in it—just you and me?"

" Pretty snappy idea, I think."

" But we can't—you know we can't."

He was smiling happily. " Can't we?"

" Niall—Uncle would be furious. Besides, you can't drive and you haven't got a licence."

" Of course he'd be furious—if he knew. But he won't. He won't be back till to-morrow at the soonest. And haven't I told you already this morning that I *can* drive."

" Anyway, you haven't got a licence."

His grin widened and he shrugged his shoulders. " What does that matter?"

" You could be fined."

" Who would fine me! The nearest cop is at the Junction. And we're not going anywhere like so far as that."

" Where *are* we going?"

" Oh, just up the hill road a bit. We might park the car and climb the Pudding Bowl and have our lunch there."

She wavered. It would be fun to go off like that on their own. " Niall, are you perfectly positive you can drive?"

"Open the gates and watch me!" He let out the clutch and the car moved slowly forward. To Alison's anxious gaze it was driven just as skilfully as when her uncle or Hamish was at the wheel. "Now are you satisfied, woman! Hop in."

"Promise you won't go fast——"

"Alison, for goodness' sake——"

"Somebody in the village will be sure to see us."

"Pity you're not like your namesake in Wonderland and you could shut up like a telescope till you were the size of a mushroom. Then we could sneak through the village with you stuck on the bonnet as a mascot."

That made her giggle, and without protesting any more she jumped in. Perhaps she was being fussy. She had enormous faith in Niall, and if he said he could drive the car—well, she knew he could, and that was that. Presently they were running smoothly towards the village, then as they turned sharply to the left up the steep hill road, all his attention was given to the car. Alison relaxed and snuggled down in her seat. It was exciting coming out like this without any of the grown-ups. With Niall there always was a feeling of adventure, whether it was something like this that you knew you oughtn't to be doing, or just ordinary things like fishing the burn or going off alone in the boat.

There was something about Niall that seemed to attract adventure. At any rate things *happened* at Clarig, making the holidays unlike the holidays that other girls had.

As they climbed the hilly winding road that twisted up the Glen with the burn on one side and the golf course on the other, Niall took a quick look at his sister. "Who said I couldn't drive!"

"You're doing jolly well," she said. But her mind had been far away, remembering the time on the top of Ben Chiarmhor last summer when Ranald, one of the crooks, had tried to push her over the edge of the mountain.

" I should say I am. I didn't make a creak when I changed down. Wish Uncle could have heard me. I'm going to change up now—listen." But this time there was a hideous discordant creaking of gears.

Niall pulled a face and Alison said, laughing: " I should say it's just as well he can't hear you!"

When they had gone for about a couple of miles beyond Clarig House she asked: " How much farther are we going?"

He accelerated a little and grinned. " Don't know."

" But you said we might climb the Pudding Bowl, and if we do, this is the place we should start from."

He slowed down but did not stop. " I'd forgotten about that, but as the engine's running so well, why shouldn't we go on for a bit and we could climb it on our way back? Rather fun this, isn't it?"

" Gorgeous! I'm loving it."

" I'm almost inclined to agree with Shona when she says it's better without grown-ups."

" In a way," she said doubtfully. " Shona can say what she likes, but I think it's nicer when we're all at home and I'm glad Hamish is coming to-morrow."

He pointed to a small loch a little way off the road. " How about having lunch there and watching the fish jumping?" And, without waiting for a reply, he drew the car carefully in to the side of the narrow road, running it slightly on to the verge, then switched off the engine in a casual manner as if he were accustomed to driving every day. He had grown a lot since the Christmas holidays, Alison thought as she watched him. He really looked quite grown-up now. She, on the other hand, though she wanted so much to be tall, hadn't grown a bit.

" Are you going to leave the key sticking in the dash?" she asked, as he got out.

" Safe enough. Still, it might be better to lock it up. It would take some explaining to Uncle if somebody pinched his bus."

Alison sniffed appreciatively as they climbed a dyke and crossed a tussocky field. " D'you smell the bog myrtle?" She stooped and picked a sprig. " It's got the scent of a windy day—I love it."

" So you should, seeing it's supposed to be the flower of the Clan Campbell."

" Is it? I didn't know. It might be fun to have it painted on the prow of the boats."

He wasn't listening, and after a minute he said: " I wonder if there'll be any excitement these hols?"

" I hope not," she said decidedly.

" Now come off it, Alison. You know you hope nothing of the kind. Who found the secret entrance to Ranald's cottage last summer? Who saw the ghost at Ashnish? Who was suspicious of Thomas before anybody else? Who remembered that the professor had once been a gardener at Clarig House? You can't do all that without getting a kick out of it."

" In a way it was fun, but this time I hope we'll have nice ordinary hols without any gangsters."

" Gosh! How you repeat yourself! You say the same thing every hols——"

" And you always make the same reply. That nothing exciting could possibly happen——"

" But something always does," he said, grinning. " Still, the fun is bound to end some time."

"It can't end too soon for me," she said, but, even as she spoke, she was uncertain whether she meant it or not. She stumbled a little on the heather. They were climbing a mound that overlooked the loch. "Look, Niall. A fish jumped—just there. I could see it distinctly shining——"

He struck an attitude and quoted:

"'The pleasantest angling is to see the fish,
Cut with her golden oars the silver stream——'"

"Golden oars?" she repeated, puzzled. "If you mean by that its body, the fish I saw looked silver."

He yawned, and sat down on the springy turf. "Let's have our picnic here. What's in this thermos?"

"Soup, I think."

He unscrewed the cap and began singing, in a loud voice:

"'. . . beautiful soup! Who cares for fish,
Game or any other dish——'"

"Oh, Niall, shut up." She took the thermos from him and poured some soup into a cup and handed it to him. "Take it—quick—or it'll spill."

They ate in silence, watching the gentle ripple ruffling the water and the occasional rings made by the fish. "Wish we'd brought our rods," he said.

"Wish we had. Though it would be poaching to fish here, wouldn't it?"

"All the better fun."

"It's funny that it should be more fun to do things you're not supposed to do, like poaching and taking the car out as we're doing——"

"It's funny, but it's true. It always is more fun." He passed his cup. "Any more eats in that bag?"

"A chunk of cake and some biscuits," she replied, tossing them over. So they finished the good things Kirsty had packed for them, and after tucking the waste paper well into the heather, they turned back across the field to the car.

"Are we going home now?" she asked, as he unlocked the door.

"Suppose we might as well. We could climb the Pudding Bowl if you're still keen." She nodded and he pressed the self-starter. Immediately the engine purred smoothly. He let out the clutch, put his foot on the accelerator, and after a spasmodic leap the car moved gently forward.

"We could turn beside that gate," she suggested.

"Y-yes," he said. But there was a curious inflection in his voice, and though he slowed down he drove on past the gate.

"Wasn't it wide enough to turn there?"

"Heaps wide enough," he replied shortly, then stopped altogether and began doing things with his gears.

She sat in silence watching him. "Something wrong?"

"What would be wrong?" But he continued to wiggle the gears.

Then he stopped and leaned back in his seat. "Alis, I'm a mutt. There *is* something wrong. I'm not so clever as I thought I was. You see," he went on awkwardly, "I can't remember how to reverse."

"Oh, goodness——"

"You needn't look like that. We'll get back all right. All we have to do is to find a roundabout road."

"Yes," she said doubtfully. She was dying to say: "But, Niall, you *said* you could drive. You were positive you could." But there was something about his expression, stern yet worried, that forbade any such remark. Besides, she felt sorry for him. He had been so thrilled over taking the car out, at finding that he could really drive.

"There's a road near the Junction," he said. "Beside the fir wood. It cuts up north. Do you remember?"

"Yes—but it's just a farm track."

"It's quite a decent road. Uncle told me it landed out somewhere beyond Ashnish Lodge."

"It's a pretty rough road, Niall, and awfully narrow." She did not add that it was a very long road to the Junction. "Couldn't we take that road on the right that goes round by Chiarmhor?"

"It's pretty narrow too."

"But it's not so rough as the other one."

"You're sure we can get right round that way."

"Oh yes. Positive. Sallie goes that way sometimes."

"Okay. Keep your eyes skinned for it."

"We can't miss it," she said cheerfully.

He started up the car again and they drove on through the patchwork of the countryside—fields in red and green and brown, and here and there a lochan beside the road. It was certainly a bit awkward not being able to turn but it was a lovely day to be out, and what did a few extra miles matter? Niall drove carefully, too, and to them both it was a tremendous thrill to be out like this by themselves.

Within a few miles of the Junction Alison pointed to a grey twist of road that curled beside a dark green wood. "Niall, if you'd rather go that way," she began, but a stray sheep was running helplessly ahead of them, and with his eyes fixed on it Niall only grunted.

The Chiarmhor road that branched right was only a few miles farther on and it really was a better road, and all they had to do was to follow it till it came to the hamlet of Chiarmhor, and then turn back to Clarig. Niall leaned forward in his seat, peering a little.

"Golly! What's that coming towards us? It's like a snake winding down the hill."

"It's caravans. Ever so many of them. They're painted green and red. Niall—I think it's a travelling circus."

He chuckled. "Then I shall keep a close eye on you till they have gone."

She murmured something inaudible but she did not smile. Once, several years ago, she had run away from home meaning to join a circus. It hadn't been a bit like what she had expected. And even now, though it happened such a long time ago, the sight of these gaily-painted caravans brought it all back to her. The long walk through the hills in search of the circus, the misery and the alone-ness of finding herself a circus girl, the cruelty of the man with the red face who had scoffed at the way she rode and then had stolen her purse. She remembered it all so clearly.

If it hadn't been for Niall, who had rescued her in the middle of the night—that was typical of Niall!—she might have been there still. It was a ghastly memory, and as she watched the long twisting line of caravans come nearer she wished she could shut her eyes till they had gone.

Niall had slowed down almost to walking pace. "Don't know how I'm going to pass such a menagerie. That kind of thing shouldn't be allowed on a narrow road."

"Perhaps we should pull in to the side till they've gone," she suggested, and had Niall had a little more experience in driving that is what he would have done. As it was, he said easily: "It'll be okay if I go slowly and you watch at your side to make sure I don't go into the ditch."

So obediently she put her head out of the window and guided him till gradually the lumbering caravans passed and once more the road was clear. He switched off the engine. " Must have a rest after that. Gosh, they didn't leave me much room, did they! I don't know how they missed my mudguards."

" I was sure they'd get you," she said, and turned to look at the disappearing caravans. Suddenly she gave a quick, startled exclamation. " Niall! Oh, Niall—we've passed the road to Chiarmhor. We've missed the turning." Impulsively, she jumped out and pointed. " Look—there it is. Where the dyke ends. It's so near," she added helplessly, and her expression said: " Couldn't we turn back?"

In silence Niall also got out and looked back. " Well, that's done it. A miss is as good as a mile."

" If only that blinking circus hadn't come along!"

" You were going to tell me where to turn off," he said crossly.

" But you said I had to watch the grass verge——"

" I know, I know. But you said you couldn't miss it. I counted on you."

" Well, if it comes to that, I counted on your being able to turn."

" That's different. I'd never tried reversing. But you were so positive that you knew the road."

" I did know it, and I'd have seen it if it hadn't been for the caravans." But she spoke guiltily. She hadn't been so intent on finding the road as remembering her adventures with the circus.

" And so what!" he said. " Where do we go from here? That's what I want to know."

" Uncle usually has a map in the cubby-hole. No, it isn't here. Unless it's in one of the pockets. Try your side." But the pockets also were empty save for a grimy yellow duster.

He wrinkled his brows. " Try and think, Alis. Can you remember any other road that would take us back by Chiarmhor?"

She shook her head. " I don't think there is one."

" I don't think so either," he agreed dismally. " Golly, this is a jam!"

" Couldn't we ask the first car we meet if they'd turn the car for us?"

" No, we couldn't. You never know, there might be somebody in the car who'd want to see my licence."

She nodded, though she suspected that his true reason was that it touched his pride to admit to anyone that he could not reverse the car. " What can we do, then?"

" Only one thing to be done. This is quite a good road, it won't be dark till late, and we've got lashings of petrol—we'll push on to Inverness."

" Inverness? But that must be—how many miles?"

He waved his hand vaguely. " Search me. Fifty—sixty—maybe more."

" A hundred at least there and back, and we've got to get to Clarig after that. Oh, Niall—we can't go as far as that."

His mouth set in the determined line she knew so well, then he grinned sideways at her. " You sound like the bell that tolled the knell of parting day. ' Pluck up thy spirits, look cheerfully upon me '." He switched on the engine again. " The Campbells are coming! Inverness first stop."

CHAPTER II

Trouble with Hamish

But Inverness was by no means the first stop. For the car, which had been running so well for the first part of the journey, gradually began to make strange noises. Its gasps and splutters were so peculiar that Niall lost his jaunty manner and kept switching off the engine in the hope that next time it started up it would be back to normal, and it was a very worried-looking youth who drove carefully along the cobbled streets of the Highland capital, towards the garage where Mr. Campbell usually had his repairs done.

The young mechanic who examined the engine gave a long whistle as he exclaimed: " Well, well, sir, but it is the lucky man you are!"

Niall stood up very straight. Nobody had called him " sir " before. " Is it something serious?"

The man removed his head from inside the bonnet. " Might have been. Tappits here need attention, but your radiator is bone dry—another half-mile and your engine would have seized."

From his tone Niall realized that they had barely escaped disaster. He said humbly: " Do you think you can put it right for us?"

" Certainly, sir. I'll see to it. Call about ten tomorrow morning."

" Oh—but—but we must get back to Clarig tonight."

The man removed his cap and scratched his head. "Clarig? That's a long way." He looked at the Campbells more closely. "Am I right? Will you be young Mr. Campbell? I would never have known you —you're growing so tall. And this is your sister? Well! And what is it you are doing now that you have left school?"

Niall grinned at him in a shamefaced way. "I'm afraid I'm still at school." Adding without quite meaning to: "I'm just sixteen."

The mechanic, who scarcely reached to Niall's shoulders, smiled up at him. "It's tall for your age you are." Then he put up his hand to his chin thoughtfully. "But if you're only sixteen——"

Niall put his hand inside his collar. "I know what you're thinking. And you're right. It's my uncle's car and I—I haven't a licence."

"Bit awkward that, now, sir. Never mind. I'll see that it's put right and I will not be saying a word to anybody. If you come back in a couple of hours I'll have her ready for you."

He was turning away when Niall went after him. "There's just one thing I'd like to ask you. Perhaps you would be good enough to show me——"

Alison, who had been standing near, moved considerately out of sight. Poor Niall, it was rotten for him to have to admit to the garage man that he could drive but couldn't reverse. She walked up the garage till she was out of hearing. It was a big place and full of all kinds of cars. One she noticed particularly was a brand new cream-and-black two-seater sports model with a long bonnet. Its paint and chromium shone. She must point it out to Niall. How he would revel in a car like that!

From the other side two men approached this car and one of them said: " It would be madness for us to take a car like that with us, that anybody could recognize a mile off."

" I don't see that it matters," said the other man.

" Where we're going we don't want to be conspicuous. Besides, this car might be recognized later—that would not suit either you or me."

" Well—perhaps something less noticeable might be better for——" Here followed a name that Alison could not make out. " Though I hate the idea of leaving this one at the mercy of a pack of garage hands."

" It's a risk we must take," said the first man firmly. " Anyway, our business is more important than the car. And this garage is reasonably reliable. It may interest you to know that our friend Campbell garages here."

She heard no more, but as she rejoined Niall and the mechanic she thought over that last remark. Of course Campbell was a common enough name all over Scotland. But it seemed a coincidence. She mentioned it to Niall as they left the garage.

He was sceptical. " This place is sticking with Campbells. Nothing to do with Uncle you may be sure. Could you imagine any pals of his running a bus like that? I couldn't. Not a hope! Wish there was. Nothing but a set of mouldy scrap-heaps in all the lot we know."

" I wish Sir Angus could hear you calling his Rolls a scrap-heap."

" That doesn't count. It's not a sports car anyhow and nobody is allowed to drive it but the chauffeur." He turned to her sharply. " How much money have you got with you?"

" Me? Money? I haven't any."

"None?"

She shook her head. "'Course not. Why should I? You know we never take money when we go out—we don't need it."

"Well, we need it to-day."

"Oh yes, to pay for the car!"

"I'm not worrying so much about that. They know who we are and we can send on the money for the repair, but we've got to get something to eat. I don't know about you but I am distinctly peckish."

It wasn't till he mentioned food that she realized that she, too, was extremely hungry. "Haven't you any money either?"

From his pocket he produced a shilling, a sixpence, and a few coppers. "That's all. Not much for a slap-up meal for two starving people!"

"I wish we hadn't eaten all that cake and stuff at lunch-time. I didn't really want it but it seemed a pity not to use it up."

"I suppose we could go into a café or something and ask for scones and tea? Only I want more to eat than that."

"Tell you what, Niall. Mr. Murchison knows heaps of people in Inverness. Let's ring him up and ask if we could borrow some money from one of them."

"That might be an idea. I wonder what it costs to telephone Clarig from here."

"Quite a lot I expect."

"Then we can't do it. If none of Mr. Murchison's friends were at home we'd have spent all our cash on the call and nothing left to buy anything."

"I know. We could ask them to reverse the charges. Some of the girls do that when they telephone home from school."

He raised his eyebrows. "Trust the female sex to know all the dodges. Still—— We might go back to the garage and ring up from there. That mechanic is awfully decent. I'll ask him about it."

But when Niall was put through to Clarig Manse, the minister's housekeeper, Miss Scott, replied in her frosty tone that Mr. Murchison was out visiting and would not be back for some time. "Any message I can give him?" she concluded, in the disapproving voice that the young Campbells felt sure she kept specially for them.

"No, I don't think so, thank you, Miss Scott. Good-bye." He laid down the receiver and turned irritably to Alison. "I wish you'd stop tugging my arm. You nearly made me drop the thing."

"I was only trying to remind you to ask the operator to reverse the charges."

"Oh, well, it's too late now."

The mechanic was waiting for them. "Excuse me, Mr. Niall, but I couldn't help hearing what you were saying to your sister. I know when you came out to-day you would not be expecting to need any money, and the call can be charged up along with the repair. But the two of you will be wanting something to eat, so perhaps I could help you. If five shillings would be any use——"

"I say, that's terribly decent of you. We are a bit short."

"We'll send back the money to-morrow," put in Alison.

"No hurry," smiled the mechanic. "Only too pleased to oblige any of the Campbells. I've heard a lot about you and about your fishing as well."

"From Uncle, I suppose," said Niall.

"No, no, not from Mr. Campbell but from Rab—you will be knowing my cousin Rab. He is the postman at Clarig."

"Of course we know Rab," they said together, and Niall added: "He's a great friend of ours——"

"He's a grand piper too," said Alison. "He always comes to our parties and plays the reels. Next time you come to Clarig to see Rab, you must come along to the Cottage."

"And bring your rod, if you fish. We know all the lochs round about."

The mechanic grinned at them. "To be sure you do. Rab is always telling me there is nobody to beat the Campbells for fishing at all at all."

"Rab talks a lot of nonsense," Niall said awkwardly. "Come on, then, Alis—we'll go and look for that restaurant."

After an excellent meal they went for a walk along the river, and when they returned to the garage Duncan met them at the entrance. "She is all ready for you. I took her outside—it's just a wee bit tricky getting through all the cars."

"Thanks a lot," said Niall, then pointed to a car just inside. "That's a dandy bus in there—the black-and-cream sports car in the corner."

"Aye, she's a fine car. She belongs to two gentlemen who have business in west Sutherland. But they don't care for the Highland roads, though mind you, I have ridden on many worse roads in England—anyway, they are leaving this one here and they have hired an old saloon." Duncan smiled at them dryly. "One of them is after calling himself Colonel Donald Macdonald, pretending he is a Highland laird, if you please. But he sounded more like Mr. Brass of Birmingham."

The Campbells settled themselves in the car and Duncan leaned forward. " Now, Mr. Niall, I will just show you once more how to reverse." Niall smoothly moved the gears. "Aye! That's the thing. You have it now."

" Thanks again," Niall said gratefully.

" I don't know what we'd have done if we hadn't met you," said Alison.

" It has been a pleasure to be sure. But just one word in your ear before you will be going off. I know you will be in a hurry to get home, but seeing you have not got your driving licence, and you being a wee bittie under age, you will not be offended, Mr. Niall, if I suggest that you take your time on the road. For though I was after telling that Colonel—him from Birmingham—that it was a fine stretch of road—and so it is, mind you—it is narrow, so you'll mind the passing places."

" We'll be very careful, Duncan."

" Good-bye to you both. If you keep to the right here, then straight on, you will avoid most of the traffic, and it will be all the better for you if you are not going too fast. I think you should get home before it is dark—but that's the switch for the side lights—this is the one for the head lights—and here is your spot light."

" Thanks," Niall said humbly, and did not add that he did know how the lights worked. He let in the clutch and the car slid slowly forward. " Cheer-oh, then, and thanks again."

Cautiously they crawled through the streets of Inverness, for Duncan's words of advice were ringing in Niall's ears, and he certainly had had enough trouble for one day. But when they had left the cobbles behind them and reached the open road to the west, he pressed the accelerator. " The sun's going to be bad—right in our eyes the whole way. That'll slow us down a lot."

" But we'll manage home before it's dark?" she said.

" Oh yes, sure to," he replied easily.

" It's a long way. I'm thinking about Kirsty, Niall. We should have told Miss Scott to let her know we might be a bit late."

" Perhaps we should. But she won't worry. She knew we were going off for the day and she might easily be late herself."

It was now definitely evening. The wind had dropped and the scurrying clouds seemed to hang motionless in the sky. There was next to no traffic, hardly any cars, and chiefly farm workers on their cycles hurrying home from their work. The countryside seemed very empty. Apart from the cows and the sheep the only sign of life came from the plumes of blue smoke rising from the farmhouse chimneys. The colours of the fields that had been so brilliant a few hours before were now soft and subdued, as if they were done in pastel.

" Don't you love being out in the evening, Niall, when the sun's setting like this and everything is so quiet? I feel the country is more friendly to you than it is in the daytime."

" You do talk rot, Alis," he murmured. But actually his thoughts were elsewhere. They still had many miles to go but he dared not drive faster. So he kept his mind on his driving and his eyes on the road ahead, and gradually the distance lessened.

" We must be pretty near the Junction now," said Alison.

" We should just make it—home, I mean—before it's dark. Well, it's been quite an adventure in its way."

" More of an adventure for you, taking the car all this way when you'd never driven before." He grinned broadly and said: "Did I say I hadn't ever driven before?"

She looked at him sharply. "If you didn't actually say it, it's what you made me think. Niall—you don't mean——"

He grunted. "You must imagine I'm a pretty smart guy if you think I could have driven all these miles to-day if I hadn't had a shot or two at the wheel before. I told you what a sport Lanky's dad was. Well, he let me have a go once or twice but he made me promise not to say anything about it seeing I hadn't a licence——"

"And seeing you weren't seventeen," she put in quietly. But he did not reply. They had rounded a bend and a few yards ahead of them a car was drawn up. As they approached a man signalled to them to stop, and as Niall put on his brakes, Alison said hurriedly: "That's one of the men who were in the garage. The ones with the black-and-cream sports car."

"So sorry to trouble you," the man said politely, "but we've got a puncture and our jack has gone amissing. Could we borrow yours? It'll only take a few minutes to change the wheel."

"Certainly," said Niall, getting out. "Our jack is in the boot, I think. Open that drawer, Alison, and get the key from the tool kit."

"Nuisance for you having a puncture so late at night," Niall went on, as he opened the boot.

"It is," replied the man shortly.

"Have you come far?"

It seemed to Alison that he hesitated for a moment before he said: "A goodish bit. Edinburgh."

"Mm. Quite a run. And have you still far to go?"

But on this point the man was non-committal. " Not very far. We're making for the coast and we'd have been there by now but for this wretched puncture."

" Could I lend a hand with the wheel?"

" No, thank you very much. My friend and I will manage all right."

Niall got in beside Alison again. " Of all the bad luck——"

" Seems to have been a day of punctures. First us, now them."

" I wasn't thinking of them but of us. This hold-up will make all the difference to our getting back in daylight. By the time we get home I bet Kirsty will be out rousing the village."

" I wish we'd remembered to tell Miss Scott to ring her up——"

" Well, we didn't, so there's no use fidgeting now. And these men shouldn't take so very long on the job. They've come from Edinburgh to-day."

" Yes, I heard him say so, but I don't think they did. At least they told Duncan they'd had the car sent on to Perth by rail and had picked it up there yesterday."

" That's queer. Maybe you misunderstood what they said."

" No, I didn't. I heard quite distinctly." He said nothing, and after a minute she said: " I wonder who they are and where they're going."

" I don't care if they're going to Timbuctoo, but I wish they'd get a move on."

She yawned. " They're taking an age. Doesn't look as if they'd ever changed a wheel before. Colonel Donald Macdonald," she repeated softly. " I don't know any Macdonalds around Clarig, do you?"

" They don't live here," he reminded her. " They're only visiting, Duncan said. And——" He broke off abruptly as the motorist came towards them, carrying the jack.

"I am very grateful to you. In this benighted spot you might wait all night and get nobody to help you. Hope you weren't in a hurry."

"Not at all," said Niall politely, but as the man went back to his own car, he said to Alison: "I'd have liked him better if he'd offered to help me put the jack back in its position."

By the time he had fixed it the other car was disappearing round the curve, at the end of a long straight stretch, and after it went they could still hear the hoot of its horn echo through the hills.

He switched on the engine. "They appear to be in a hurry if we're not, narrow roads or no narrow roads."

"They're not going to Clarig, anyhow; see, they've taken the road that goes up to the right—I can just make out the car at the side of the fir wood, the one you wanted to take this morning."

He only grunted in reply. All his energies were now concentrated on getting home. Fortunately the spring twilight was long and with luck they would still be back before the night fell completely.

When at last the Clarig hills began to tower above them on all sides he heaved a loud sigh of relief. "Nearly there now. And lucky for us there's nobody but Kirsty at home. Still, it has been fun, hasn't it?"

"Mm. Lovely. I don't suppose Kirsty will be too pleased about our arriving at this hour——"

"Not to mention our having taken the car. I expect she'll bark a bit and bite our noses off, but she'll soon calm down. You can always get round Kirsty."

They passed the lodge gates of Clarig House, and

Niall drove with special care down that last lap of road that curled so steeply down to the village and then sharp right along the shore road to the Cottage.

As they drew near, Alison was mentally planning a soothing greeting to Kirsty so as to avoid a possible row, for on occasion Kirsty was not slow with scoldings when she considered scoldings necessary.

Daylight had given place to that betwixt and between time when it is neither quite light nor quite dark. It was past lighting-up time, but Niall, still a little unsure about the workings of the headlights, had not switched them on, and as he turned slowly in at the gate muttering to Alison: " I never knew this was such a narrow entrance!" a tall figure emerged from the greyness and came towards them.

" It's Hamish," exclaimed Alison in dismay, thinking as she spoke that this must be the first time she wasn't thrilled to greet her elder brother.

" Is that you, Niall?" he called, in a voice that neither Alison nor Niall had heard him use before. Niall got such a shock that he automatically turned off the engine.

" Get out and I'll run her into the garage," Hamish said curtly.

Although he knew he was in the wrong and guessed there was going to be trouble, Niall could not help protesting: " I can manage by myself."

Hamish simply repeated shortly: " Get out. Hurry up."

Niall winked at Alison, but she knew by the flush on his cheeks that he did not feel so perky as he would have her believe.

" It wasn't really Niall's fault, Hamish," she said, as he was closing the garage doors.

" Are you telling me that the car insisted on being driven out?"

" Oh, don't be so beastly sarcastic, Hamish," said Niall. " I'll explain if you'll give me a chance."

But there was Kirsty to meet before that. She was waiting in the hall, arms akimbo, her hair slightly askew, and her faded blue eyes that were so usually full of kindness flashing with anger.

" Well, indeed!" she said. " This is fine goings on! It was thinking you were lost or killed I was. Children like you going off in the Master's car—and after you saying you were going out on your bicycles—and me in charge here and responsible for you both. I never heard the like."

She stopped through lack of breath, and Alison said: " Very sorry, Kirsty. We should have rung up, I know."

Kirsty tossed her head indignantly. " Rung up! You should never have been away at all."

And when Niall stood beside her grinning a little sheepishly and said: " Sorry and all that, Kirsty!" she, who could rarely resist Niall, replied sharply: " Sorry? Sorry is easy said."

" Is supper ready?" put in Hamish.

" All but the coffee, Mr. Hamish. I will be seeing to it this minute." And she went off with her cheeks still aflame.

Supper was a silent meal—literally. Nobody spoke. Hamish had produced a book and read intently, but Alison and Niall sat opposite each other with expressionless faces, hardly daring to meet each other's eyes.

At last when they had finished eating Hamish closed his book with a snap and said in words that also seemed to snap: " Well, out with it, Niall. What's your story?"

Niall's eyes suddenly sparkled. " Prisoner at the bar," he said irrepressibly, " you are charged with being in possession of stolen property——"

The last thing Alison wanted to do was to laugh, but she gave a spasmodic sort of giggle, then promptly shut up as Hamish said in the same chilly tones: " You don't seem to realize, either of you, that this is not a jest. It is an extremely serious proceeding."

" It might have been, you mean," Niall said cheekily.

" Might still be if somebody reports you for driving without a licence."

Niall gulped. He did not feel nearly so cheerful as he sounded. He dropped his light tone. " I'm very sorry, Hamish. It all happened accidentally. We *had* meant to go out on our bikes, but after I'd mended umpteen punctures—that tube must be absolutely rotten!—well, we just thought it would be fun to take the car out."

" Did Alison think so too?"

They replied together. Niall said: " Oh, it was all my idea!" And Alison said: " Yes, of course I did. I was dying to go."

" We only meant to go for a short run," went on Niall. " We meant to be back quite early."

" And why weren't you?"

Niall said awkwardly: " It was—you see—somehow I couldn't get the hang of the right way to reverse the car, so we had to keep going on till we found a road that would bring us back—in a round. But—well—we missed the only one and so we had to carry on to——"

" To where?"

" To Inverness," he muttered.

" Inverness! Holy smoke! Don't tell me you've been to Inverness and back——"

" It was partly my fault," said Alison. " Niall suggested turning at the road that goes north near the Junction, but I persuaded him to go on and try the Chiarmhor road."

Hamish leaned back in his chair. "Go on—tell me the worst, Niall."

So Niall continued his tale while Hamish listened with an exasperated expression. At the end he said simply: "You two have got me beat. You, Niall, know quite well that Uncle will allow you to drive the car as soon as you are old enough. Everybody realizes that once somebody has learned to drive, that is the dangerous time. Case of 'a little learning . . .'. You might have had a bad smash—burst up the car and yourselves into the bargain, and you might have been had up for driving when you were under age——"

"And not having a licence," finished Niall, with a feeble grin. "I know. It sounds like 'a tale told by an idiot'."

In spite of himself Hamish relaxed. "I suppose you would find something to quote if the heavens fell, Niall."

"Are you going to tell Uncle?"

"Oh, don't be daft, Niall. Why should I tell Uncle? But you'll be jolly lucky if somebody else doesn't tell him. *Somebody* must have seen you to-day. I hate to think what Uncle would say. Thank your lucky stars that he didn't come home unexpectedly instead of me."

He grinned at them both and Alison said: "You are a sport, Hamish."

"Thanks for nothing," he growled. "But I am your elder brother and what you do affects me too in a way. And you must promise me, both of you, that you won't take the car out again without permission."

"You're quite safe there," said Niall rather drearily.

" Okay. Then buzz off to the kitchen and put things right with Kirsty. And don't try making any excuses to *her*! Poor old Kirsty! She was in tears when I arrived, blaming herself and saying it was all her fault for having taken the day off."

As they left the room Niall popped his head round the door. " By the way, Hamish, what made you come home to-night? I thought you didn't mean to be here till to-morrow or the next day?" It was the question he had been dying to ask for the past hour.

But Hamish was still very much the elder dealing with a kid brother who had misbehaved. " Looks as if you'd thought wrong, then," he said, and did not so much as look up from his book.

So between what Hamish did say to them, and the scolding that was in Kirsty's whole face as she listened to their apology, though for once she did not express it in words, Alison and Niall went upstairs feeling thoroughly unhappy.

" What a bleak beginning to the hols!" said Alison sadly, as they were saying good night at the top of the stairs.

" Sez you! Looks as if it's true what Uncle says—crime doesn't pay!"

CHAPTER III

The Colonel in the Yellow Kilt

Grievances were never kept up in the Campbell family. Next morning Hamish was his usual amiable self and no reference at all was made to the escapade of the day before. When Alison came down to breakfast and saw him grinning at her from behind the milk jug, his book propped up in front of him, her spirits rose instantaneously to their usual holiday level. Niall too, following close on her heels, whistling a tuneless whistle by way of trying out the temperature of the family atmosphere, looked relieved when he heard Hamish ask casually: "Anybody care to go fishing this morning?"

"Me, for one," said Alison quickly.

"Me, too. But it'll have to be the burn, Hamish. Sir Angus has some guests at Clarig House so we can't go on the river."

Hamish helped himself to toast. "Sir Angus rang up last night just before you came in to say that he and his party are going to Ashnish Loch to-day, so we can have the river if we want it."

"Oh, goody!" exclaimed Alison. "Niall and I have been dying to fish the river since we came home."

"Ring up Shona, then, and tell her we'll meet her there right away——"

"Shona? But Shona's in England," said Alison.

"She arrived yesterday," smiled Hamish. "I missed my train at Inverness and had decided I'd have to stay overnight when I ran into Shona and her mother—or to be more accurate their car nearly ran into me. So they brought me back with them."

"Golly! A wonder we didn't meet them on the road," said Alison, and was about to add: "Why didn't you tell us that last night?" but thought it would be more tactful not to. "That's lovely—Shona being here, I mean."

Niall growled. "Lovely my foot. It mucks things up when she's around. We have to do everything Miss High and Mighty likes."

"Still, if she hadn't been here we'd probably not have been asked on the Clarig this morning."

Niall chuckled. "You've said it. I bet she engineered that her uncle and his friends would buzz off to Ashnish so that she could have the river."

"And what's wrong with that?" asked Hamish. "Surely the river with Shona is better than the burn without her?"

"Niall is never fair to Shona."

Niall wiped some egg from his mouth and quoted gaily:

> "'Use every man after his desert, and who should
> 'Scape whipping!'

Certainly not Shona Lessing. She's a minx!"

"It's because you're so rude to her," said Alison. "She's much nicer when you're not there."

Hamish laughed. "Is that a hint for Niall to stay at home?"

"If it is it's wasted on me. Not even Shona would keep me away from the river on a day like this. The wind is exactly right. I'll go and look out some flies——"

"Half a minute," said Hamish. "There's just one thing. I don't suppose that Shona will mention Uncle, but if she does I'll deal with her. Don't ask me any questions at this stage for I can't answer them, but officially Uncle is at home, laid up with a heavy cold."

They stared at him blankly, but they knew that when he spoke in that tone there was nothing more to be got out of him, so murmuring "Okay!" Alison went to telephone Shona and Niall went to see about his fishing tackle.

In a short time they were ready to go. Niall was in the porch working with his rod. "I'm putting up my rod now to save time when we get there."

"Listen, Niall," said Alison. "Shouldn't we have dashed along to the post office this morning to send off that postal order to Duncan?"

He fixed on his reel and began threading the line through the eyes. "I was remembering about that but we can do it at lunch-time."

"But shouldn't we send it off right away? It was so decent of him to lend it to us——"

"Oh, it doesn't matter for a day." He was absorbed in what he was doing. "If we post it this afternoon he'll get it the day after to-morrow at latest——"

Hamish appeared from the hall. "Who'll get what the day after to-morrow?"

Alison flushed uncomfortably. She didn't want to start a discussion about yesterday's happenings. "It's Duncan—the man in the garage at Inverness. 'Member we told you about him—he lent us five bob to get something to eat and he let us charge up the telephone call. We said we'd send it back to him to-day, but we haven't time now to go to the post office and be in time for Shona——"

" It won't break him if he doesn't get it for another day," Niall said impatiently. " Will it, Hamish?"

He shrugged his shoulders. " Don't suppose it will, but you know what Uncle would say. I mean, if you really promised you'd send it to-day——"

" But we'd still be sending it if we posted it at lunch-time."

" And Shona does hate to be kept waiting," said Alison.

" The mail out goes at twelve, doesn't it?" Hamish said rather pointedly.

" Okay," Niall said in a resigned voice. " I'll go along on my bike."

" Have you any money?" asked Hamish.

Niall grinned. " Not very much. I spent most of what I had yesterday. But Alison always has oodles of cash. Dash up and get it, Alis, and I'll square up with you when Uncle gives me my pocket-money."

When she came down again Hamish had driven the car out of the garage and Niall was carefully placing the rods in the back.

" Oh, goody! Are you taking us in the car?"

" I am. We can't have trouble with Shona the very first morning."

" I'm afraid we used a frightful lot of petrol yesterday and we had some put in at Inverness——"

" I'm afraid you used so much that a little more won't make much difference."

" I'll have to borrow some money from you, Hamish, to pay for what was put into the tank. I said to Duncan that he might send the account to you—not to Uncle, and the repair of the car as well."

" Okay," Hamish replied briefly. " See about it later."

Although they dispatched the postal order and reached the river in record time Shona was already there. When she caught sight of them she wound in her line and came towards them. She was an attractive little figure with her flaming red hair and green jersey and red Macpherson kilt.

" Hello, Shona!" yelled the Campbells.

" Hello, you Campbells! Late as usual," she retorted. " I've been waiting for you for ages."

" About ten minutes to be exact," said Niall. " I saw you leave the house—through Uncle's glasses."

" I call that snooping," she said, laughing.

" Had any luck yet?" asked Alison, looking at the swirling peaty water, and Shona pointed silently to something that shone silver in the wet grass. " Oh! A sea trout. What a beauty!"

" Dashed good," said Hamish. " You do know how to pull them in, Shona. A three-pounder, I should say —possibly more."

" Oh——" she said, shrugging her shoulders, with a smile that was perhaps a little smug. " There's nothing to it, really."

Now Shona was an excellent fisherwoman. Like Alison, she had fished ever since she had been old enough to hold a rod, and although the Campbells were famed in the whole neighbourhood for their skill in fishing, Shona for her age was almost as good. But something in the cocksure expression of her mouth and the proud toss of her head suddenly made Niall want to take her down a peg—a sensation that was by no means unfamiliar to other people besides the Campbells when they were long in Shona's company.

" Come off it, Shona! Don't you try to pull a fast one over us, pretending it's as easy as pie. You know jolly well that often we all come out here and have a whole day that's perfectly dud, with not so much as a rise."

"Speak for yourself, Niall Campbell."

"I am, but I'm speaking for you too. And I'll tell you another thing, I bet you didn't catch that trout in the last quarter of an hour." Then, noting the dull flush that crept over her cheeks: "Maybe you didn't catch it at all."

She turned on him indignantly. "But I did catch it——"

"But not just now! Come clean now, Shona. Did you get up about six and sneak down to the river——"

"I didn't sneak down anywhere. I happened to be awake early and as it was such a lovely morning I thought it would be fun to——"

"Start off one up on the Campbells," finished Niall.

"And why not!" said Hamish. "It's a grand fish. Do you kids mean to spend all the morning arguing?"

"Looks as if Niall did," said Shona, her nose in the air.

"Never mind him, Shona," said Alison, as she had said hundreds of times before. "He's only teasing you. Tell us which pools you'd like us to take."

"Oh—anywhere you like. Hamish could have the Black Pool. I thought of taking Peaty Pool myself." Niall winked at Alison. Peaty Pool, with its smooth, dark waters curling about the rocks, was easily the best on the river.

Shona opened her book of flies and carefully selected two which she proceeded to tie on her line.

"What fly did you catch your trout on?" asked Niall.

"A Peter Ross. But I'm trying Grouse and Claret for a change. What are you putting on?"

He grinned at her. " Probably a ' Niall Campbell '."

" Hm! One of your home-made ones!" she said, raising her eyebrows and moving off.

Alison giggled a little as she and Niall ploughed along the wet path still brown and slippery with last year's leaves. " I'm afraid she doesn't think much of your flies."

" Wait till I land a twelve-pound salmon on a home-made fly and she'll change her tune. I don't wish Shona any harm, but it would do her no end of good if she suddenly had about tuppence pocket-money, like us, and no fairy uncle to give her anything she asked for. In fact, as I've said before, if Shona were poor I might quite like her."

" D'you think poor people are nicer than people who have bags of money?"

He threw back his head and laughed. " 'Course! Look at Shona and look at us!" Then, pointing to a stretch of broken water: " If you like to fish here I'll go farther on. And here—you can try this fly. A chap at school showed me how to tie it. He says it's deadly."

But the river was not fishing well that morning. Alison fished with all the tricks she knew but at the end of an hour she had not had a rise. There had been a good deal of heavy rain during the past week and the water was high, swift-running and very black. She moved upstream a little to a pool most people usually avoided because it was so hemmed in with trees. A gentle breeze in the branches made a swishing sound and little gusts swept across the river and ruffled the water, making a gleaming pattern of pleats and folds.

As she threw her line, skilfully avoiding all contact with the trees, she thought how lovely springtime was at Clarig. Not such fun, perhaps, as summer, when you could bathe and laze for hours on the beach, but on a day like this, when the sun was making a squiggly design of dazzling yellow through the bare branches, and painting the tight little buds that were just beginning to show green, and when you looked down the river and through a tracery of trees caught a glimpse of the sea that was silver in this light, she felt how lucky she was to be able to spend her holidays at a place like this.

On the opposite bank a rabbit had left its burrow and was placidly nibbling the grass, and in a bush nearby a thrush was singing a duet with the river. All these things made a lovely background to the business of fishing. Idly she gazed up the glen and across the moor to where the golf course was laid out, and her eye was caught by a man on one of the greens who appeared to be practising putting. At first she thought it was Sir Angus only he wasn't tall enough, and besides, this man was wearing a somewhat loud kilt with a lot of yellow in it—it was certainly not the Forbes tartan. Possibly one of the Clarig House guests who had not gone to Ashnish with the others, she decided.

Again she turned all her attention to her fishing, throwing a long line that squirmed gracefully along the surface of the river, casting again and again. But no fish came to her. There was a sudden startled chirruping in the laurels opposite, and although there was nobody in sight she had the curious impression that somebody was watching her. It was absurd to think so, she knew. Who could watch her? There was no one on the river but themselves. She reeled in slightly and threw a shorter line, this time glancing quickly along the opposite bank. But she saw nothing. She must be imagining it. She must. And yet she could not rid herself of

GOVT. ... ACC. No. 10797

the sensation that someone whom she could not see could see her.

Then two things happened. The first was that a fish came to her fly, and the second that, without any warning, it began to rain. To Alison, the rain did not matter and the fish did. It was not a very big one but it struggled and fought hard, and as she played it the shower all at once became a thunder plump, and heavy raindrops pattered down—a wall of rain. Just then there was a quick movement on the other side of the river, so quick that had her eyes not been focused on that precise spot she would have missed seeing a man run from behind a young larch tree to the more solid shelter of the laurels. It was the man she had seen on the golf course.

She landed the fish, caught him neatly between her hands, and then bracing herself, for this was the one thing about fishing that she could never grow accustomed to, she killed it swiftly with two sharp taps against a convenient stone. It was a brown trout, scarcely half a pound, but it was shapely and in fine condition. Carefully she laid it down on the grass and wiped her hands. But for once she was not thinking of the fish she had taken from the river. She was thinking of the man she had seen just now. As he had dashed to take cover she had distinctly seen his face. She could not make a mistake. He was one of the two men she had seen yesterday in the garage at Inverness.

For no reason a creepy little tremor ran down her spine and all at once she did not want to fish any more. She wanted to move from here at once. So she picked up her catch and hurried along to the Black Pool, where she found Hamish leaning against the wide trunk of an oak tree.

" Come and shelter here," he called. " Anything doing at your end?"

" Only this wee one. I just caught it a minute ago. What about you?"

He shook his head. " Haven't seen a thing. And as soon as the rain slackens off a bit I think we should beat it for home."

They stood there listening to the blatter of raindrops. " See the water, Hamish. It looks like tacks being hammered in."

" It feels like a geyser in full spate down my neck. This *would* be the day I haven't got my sou'-wester."

" Shall I find Shona and tell her we're going? Oh, here's Niall——"

His oilskin and wellingtons were shining. " Shona sent me to tell you she's gone home. She's burst her oilskin. Said she was soaked through. She's going to ring up about something—a surprise, she said." He shook a shower of raindrops from his sou'-wester. " Golly! Am I wet!"

" Did you have any luck?" asked Hamish.

" Nary a touch. Shona's got the only thing in the river to-day."

" Not quite." Hamish picked up Alison's trout. " Alison caught this."

" Must have been your fly that did it," she said, smiling.

" Pity I didn't know about it before Shona departed——"

He was interrupted by a sharp whistle from the other bank, and they turned to see a tall man pick his way through the bracken from the path to the edge of the water. With a Harris tweed jacket he was wearing a kilt of which the predominant colour was a shrieking yellow.

" Excuse me," he called, " I'm looking for Miss Shona Lessing. I was told she was out on the river."

Hamish stepped down through the wet grass. The river was running so fast that he had to shout a little to make himself heard. " She has gone back to the house—not two minutes ago. You must just have missed her. Did you come straight down here from Clarig House?"

" Er—no. I came across the golf course." He held up his putter. " I was trying out the greens but the shower drove me off. By the way, I think you must be the Campbells. Sir Angus said you were likely to be here with his niece."

It was Niall who replied. " You're not at Ashnish with the others, then?" As Alison listened she reflected that it was the sort of remark he would have jeered at if she had made it.

The man seemed surprised. " At Ashnish? Oh, I see what you mean. I'm not one of the house guests at Clarig. My wife and I have taken Achnamara shooting lodge for a year. Perhaps you know it—it is a few miles up the coast."

The Campbells nodded. There were few houses within a wide radius of Clarig that were unknown to them.

" My name is Donald Macdonald," the man continued. " And Sir Angus has very kindly asked me to come and take part in the golf competition he is arranging." The Campbells' faces registered a sort of blank politeness. They had heard nothing of any golf competition. " He suggested that as I did not know the course I might come over this morning when there would be nobody about. I was supposed to collect young Shona from the river and go up and have lunch with her. However, if she has gone, I had better go after her."

"We shall probably see you again," said Hamish. "Are you by any chance related to the Macdonalds who used to be at Chiarmhor Lodge?"

He shook his head. "Afraid I haven't any relations in this part of the country at all."

Niall smiled frankly at him. "Skye is the place for the Macdonalds, isn't it?"

"I suppose it is," he replied briefly, but, as Alison said afterwards to Niall, he did not say whether he was a Macdonald of Skye or a Macdonald of Birmingham.

He went off up the river and they moved down the river. The rain, which had seemed to be clearing, now came down with renewed force, and as they hurried single file along the squelchy, muddy path, there was little opportunity for conversation. Trailing a little behind the others, Alison was completely absorbed by this new turn of events and by the fact that Niall, who was so nimble in reaching conclusions and so quick in tracking down suspicious characters, should have failed to recognize this man in the kilt as one of the men they had seen yesterday.

Back at the Cottage, they were about to follow Hamish in to the house when he glanced over his shoulder. "Better give the old bus a clean up, you two. It's filthy."

"It was filthy before we took it out yesterday."

"Oh, get on with it, Niall, and don't argue." And so, reluctantly, they got out the sponge and shammy and filled up the pail with water.

"This is lousy of Hamish!"

She dipped the sponge in the cold water. "Never mind, it won't take long. Anyway, I wanted to talk to you—about the man we met on the river."

His face cleared. "Mr. Donald Macdonald!" he said, grinning. "I say, did you see his kilt? I call it an insult to the Macdonald clan to turn out in a thing like that. I bet it's an ersatz tartan. I'm willing to bet he's not a Scotsman either."

"Well, I don't suppose he'd wear a kilt in Birmingham," she said, with a quiet smile.

He turned the hose on the wheels. "Birmingham—what are you talking about?"

"Well—didn't you recognize him? He was in the garage at Inverness——"

"What?" In his surprise his aim faltered. "Watch out!" he yelled, but he was too late, and the sharp stream of water drenched her legs.

"Really, Niall——"

"Sorry—you shouldn't have been standing so near."

"I'm simply sopping!" dabbing herself with a not too clean duster.

"Well, I've said I'm sorry. Carry on about the kilted Macdonald. I certainly should not have known him—and why all the excitement anyway?"

She hesitated. "Oh, nothing. At least, I don't know. But when I was fishing, just before the rain came on, I had the queerest feeling that I was being watched from the other bank. And the birds in the laurels were making the most frightful row——"

"'It is the lark that sings so out of tune
Straining harsh discords and unpleasing sharps——'"

"Niall, do stop quoting and listen to me."

"I am listening. The birds were making the most frightful row. 'It was the owl that shrieked——'"

"Very well, if you're not interested I shan't tell you."

He pulled a face at her. "I couldn't bear that."

"I know you're laughing at me, but I'm positive he was hiding in the bushes for a while before he spoke."

"And why shouldn't he? It was probably the only dry spot he could find, and I bet he was worried about his beautiful yellow kilt."

She said nothing—with a cross face. Really, Niall could be most irritating. All the more so because what he said sounded so reasonable. She applied the shammy very vigorously to her side of the car, then looked up to find him grinning at her through the far window. "That's right! 'Furiouser and Furiouser.' I can always tell how angry you are by the way you twist your mouth and the way you go bang at things."

"I'm not angry and I don't twist my mouth."

"Okay. But get back to the Macdonald. I can't think what you're getting at. Apart from his foul kilt he seems harmless enough. And if he did peep at you through the laurels he was probably wishing he could throw a line half as long."

"His friend told Duncan he'd come from Perth and then said to you they'd motored from Edinburgh."

"Well, maybe it was his friend who hadn't told the truth." Alison gave it up. She probably *was* imagining things. He went on: "Personally, I am much more interested in this golf competition. Hope there are some decent prizes." He stood back and admired the shining coachwork. "That's what I call a good job. If Uncle isn't properly grateful——!" As he spoke, the gong sounded, and he neatly aimed his shammy at a shelf. "Ha! Finished at the psychological moment." He tugged her hair gently. "You don't know what that means, do you?"

"Don't be silly, Niall. 'Course I do."

As they crossed the hall, Hamish came out of Mr. Campbell's study. "A telegram here from Uncle. He's coming home this afternoon. Wants me to go and meet him with the car."

"Lucky we cleaned it," Niall said, beaming.

"But aren't you too late now to catch the train at the Junction?" asked Alison, as they followed Hamish through to the dining-room.

"He's not coming by train."

"Is he flying to Inverness?" asked Niall.

"He's not coming by Inverness at all." Hamish paused for a moment. "You knew he was off on one of his usual hush-hush jobs. The telegram is in code." He read it aloud. "'Cousin James arriving in Islay to-day about three.'"

"Who is Cousin James? I never heard of him," said Alison.

"It's in code, idiot," said Niall. "Translate it, Hamish."

"Uncle is due at Treasure Bay this afternoon. He is being landed secretly from a sea-plane. You know the place—just a few miles beyond Tigh-an-eas."

"But why all the secrecy?" asked Niall, wrinkling his brows.

"Can't tell you that," Hamish replied brusquely.

"Can't or won't?" he asked cheekily.

"Chiefly *can't*. It would save a lot of questions if I could tell you. But I'll say this much. Uncle has been informed that at least one member of the old gang is coming north. As you know, they never found the rest of the jewels, and it looks as if they're going to have another try at getting them."

Alison felt weak and wobbly as she always did at any mention of the gang of criminals, some of whom she and Niall had already met. "But why should Uncle come by sea-plane?"

Hamish ruffled his hair. "If any of the gang *have* reached Sutherland, he prefers that they should not know that he has been from home."

"Why?" asked Niall.

"Uncle will probably explain that to you later."

"If I know Uncle he probably won't," said Niall, under his breath.

"That's why I didn't want Shona to know he wasn't home yet. He is landing at Treasure Bay because it's completely hidden from the road. I shall borrow one of the Tigh-an-eas boats and row along to meet him."

"I'd love to see the plane land. Could we come with you?"

"No, Alison, you could not. Apart from anything else, Shona rang up while you were cleaning the car to ask you both to tea."

"Some people have all the luck," growled Niall. "You help to land Uncle by sea-plane from a hush-hush mission, and we go to a mouldy tea-fight."

"Does Uncle expect the man to arrive at Clarig—the criminal I mean?" asked Alison.

"Can't tell you. Uncle didn't say."

"Then why is he taking all these precautions?"

Niall grinned at her. "Oh, you know Uncle's methods by this time surely. He's building up the right background. Mr. Campbell, unsuspicious of any possible goings-on, in bed with a flickering eyelash or what have you—and his stupid family meandering about the country with their fishing rods. Completely harmless."

Alison giggled and Hamish remarked drily: " It might not be quite such a good build-up if Uncle knew that his stupid family—your adjective, Niall, not mine!—were meandering around the country in his car."

CHAPTER IV

Rumour of a Master Crook

When an hour or two later Alison and Niall came along the winding overhung avenue leading to Clarig House, they caught sight of Shona practising mashie shots on the lawn behind the house. She came round to meet them, swinging her club.

" Why have you only got one bike?"

" Mine's punctured so we're riding Niall's turn about."

" Okay. Park it over there and come and see what we're doing."

" I can see you're mucking up the lawn," said Niall. " And who is *we*?"

Shona glanced over her shoulder. " Colonel Donald Macdonald and me. You saw him this morning down at the river."

" We saw his kilt anyhow," Niall said impudently.

" He'll hear you!" warned Alison. " He told us his name but we didn't know he was a colonel."

" He's a frightfully good golfer. We've been playing with a captive ball and he's been giving me tips." She added, with an air of importance: " He came to lunch with me. We had it by ourselves."

" So you wouldn't have the gold plate out," he said, so gravely that Alison went into a gale of laughter.

Shona looked offended. " I can't think why I asked you to tea."

" Shall I tell you? You wanted some entertaining conversation."

A rude retort trembled on her lips, but by now they were almost at the lawn, so somehow she straightened her pouting lips and banished the anger from her eyes, and even managed a smile. Then she exclaimed sharply: " He's not here!"

Niall walked over to the captive ball. " Mind if I have a go? Lend me your mashie, Shona." And proceeded to hit the ball with an easy swing.

" The colonel says he could soon improve my game if he had a chance to teach me," still glancing around to find where he had gone.

" Are you practising for the golf competition?" asked Alison.

" Who told you about it? It was to be a surprise."

" Your friend, Colonel Macdonald, was speaking about it this morning——"

" Colonel Donald Macdonald," corrected Shona. " He is very particular about the Donald."

" It's a frightful mouthful to say every time!" said Niall.

" Sorry if you wanted the competition to be a surprise, Shona. When is it to be?"

" On Saturday. It's Uncle's idea and he's asking simply everybody——"

" Who d'you mean by everybody? The colonel, I suppose, for one?"

" Yes, rather. Wonder where he can have got to."

" He's probably gone inside. The french window is open," Alison pointed out. " Who else is playing besides the colonel?"

" Well, there'll be Uncle and Mummie and me, that's three, and all you Campbells, that's five. And

Mr. Murchison. And the Macleods. And Rab and as many of the village people as would like to come."

"That's terrific. Sounds as if you'd need somebody to direct the traffic. After all, it's only a nine-hole course."

"Uncle thinks we might have a foursome competition; what do you think?"

He grinned. "All depends on who you draw for a partner. You might be lucky and be drawn with——" He waved his hand modestly, and the sentence was still unfinished when the colonel came through the french window.

"Excuse my abrupt disappearance, but I had left my pipe in the cloakroom so I went in to fetch it." He smiled at Shona and bowed politely to the Campbells. "None the worse of your wetting on the river?"

"We're accustomed to being soaked," said Niall. "Shona's just been telling us what a hot golfer you are."

He smiled. "I expect she exaggerates. I don't play a great deal nowadays."

"Which is your home course?" Alison inquired.

"Well—now you're asking. You see, with my military duties and—ah—my moving around as I do—I—I'm not a member anywhere at the moment, but I like the links on the east coast."

"So do I," said Alison. "Because your ball runs such a long way even if it's not a terribly good shot, so you always feel you're playing well."

He smiled at her kindly, then, after some discussion as to the make of balls that he preferred, he turned to Shona: "Well, my dear, if you'll excuse me running along now, I'll say good-bye. Thank you so much for a very delightful lunch."

For a moment she forgot to be dignified. "Oh—but aren't you going to stay and have tea with us. Cook's baking a special cake for you—with chocolate icing——"

He bent over her hand as if she were grown-up. "Most charming of you to have thought of it, but I'm afraid I must get back. It's a long day for my wife when she's not able to be up. Once she is better, you must come along and visit us at Achnamara."

"That would be super," smiled Shona. They went round to the front of the house where his car was parked, and stood waving till it had purred softly up the avenue and out of sight.

"Isn't he wizard!" Shona said. "Come into the library till I show you what he brought me." They followed her through the hall, scented with great bowls of spring flowers, daffodils, hyacinths, early tulips and some violets and primroses as well, and through to the library, its walls lined with books. From a small table she picked up a large box of chocolates. She lifted the lid and passed the box to Alison. "Have one. Not the middle row, if you don't mind, because they're marzipan and I like them best. Take a square one if you like. They're hard."

Niall winked at Alison. "Don't you like the hard ones?"

Shona shook her head. "I like the squashy creamy ones and marzipans. Have another, Niall—you, too, Alison." She helped herself and said: "I think we should get down to discussing the competition—better make a list of the players first. I'll get some paper."

A narrow gallery ran round the room which was reached by a short flight of steps, and here were more book shelves that were also completely lined with books. Shona grabbed a pad from a shelf and began writing. " Shall we begin with my family and yours? You shout out the names and I'll put them down."

When she had written perhaps twenty names she bit into a chocolate and made a face. " How foul! It's a hard one. What's that you've got, Alison?"

Not daring to look at Niall, she said: " It's a marzipan, Shona."

" You meanie! You might have told me. What's yours, Niall?"

" Marzipan too," he said solemnly.

" Greedy pigs! And you've had two each——"

" We only took the ones you asked us to," said Alison.

" They must have changed the shape. Anyway, you might have given me back the second one once you saw——"

Niall gave a yell of laughter, and she snatched back the box and banged down the lid. He took a pin from his blazer and handed it to her.

" What's this for?"

" Just to help you find the hard ones. Or it might be a better idea for us all to taste one out of each row."

" If you think that's funny," began Shona, but Alison giggled. " We did that once when Mary had chocolates given to her. We stuck pins in them all so's we'd know the ones not to take."

" Hm!" remarked Shona, and pushed the sweets well out of reach. " Oh, I forgot. Will your uncle be home by Saturday?"

All at once there was a different look in the Campbells' eyes. The laughter faded and Alison glanced at Niall, who said innocently: " He's not going away anywhere—so far as I know."

" But I thought he was away."

" Did you? Must be some mistake. Didn't you hear he had a cold?"

" Uncle loves golf," Alison said, by way of helping him out. " I'm sure he'd be awfully keen to play."

When Shona had written down all the names they could think of, they cut up a number of slips of paper, and wrote a name on each slip so that they could be drawn for partners. Then, after the usual exciting tea that appeared at Clarig House as a matter of course, they set off for home.

Shona walked with them to the lodge gates, and, as she was feeling happy again, went so far as to give them another chocolate each—hard ones, which she had first carefully tested with the pin! She liked the idea that it was *she* who was planning the competition. Usually it was the other way round, and the Campbells asked her to *their* parties and *their* picnics. It constantly annoyed Shona that, although the Campbells lived in what she considered was a poky little house and had, as she knew, hardly any pocket-money, while she lived at Clarig and could have anything she liked from her uncle, if she asked for it hard enough—yet it was the Campbells who had by far the better time, and nearly all Shona's fun came as a result of being with Alison and Niall.

But this time it was different. The competition had nothing to do with the Campbells. It would be played on her uncle's private course, she would help in telling the competitors what to do, and best of all, she was to present the prizes at the end. This was her show.

" I haven't golfed for ages," Alison said, as they were saying good-bye. " I'll have to put in a spot of practice."

" Well, I can't," said Niall. " I've only got two balls left so I shall have to save them up for Saturday."

"I have a box of a dozen new ones," remarked Shona. "Cheer-oh, then."

"Like to fish the burn with us one day, Shona?" he said.

"Don't think so. I shall probably be out on the river with Uncle."

"All right, Snooty."

"Thanks for the lovely tea, Shona."

"*And* the marzipans," grinned Niall. With a wave of his hand he walked on ahead while Alison mounted the bicycle. From here it was a clear free-wheel run down to the village, but after she had rounded the first corner she braked and waited for Niall to come up with her.

"Did you happen to notice the colonel's car?" she asked.

"How d'you mean, notice? I saw it was an Austin —a twelve—and a pretty elderly one, too."

"It's the same black car that was in the garage at Inverness—it's the car that asked us for help. Now do you believe the colonel was the man we saw there?"

He ruffled his hair with his hand. "I bow to your superior knowledge, my dear Watson. I never noticed the number."

"Listen, Niall——" she began slowly.

He laid a hand on the saddle to prevent the cycle running away and laughed. "I know what you're going to say, Alis, and you're wrong. The tartan colonel is not a member of the gang. I'm sure of that. Dash it, he simply oozes respectability and he's at Achnamara——"

"Thomas and his people rented Ashnish last summer," she reminded him, "and they looked respectable if anybody did—she, especially, with that bag of knitting she carried."

"Y-yes," he said unwillingly. "But I still think Colonel Donald Macdonald is a harmless old boy."

"He's not truthful."

"You mean his saying he came from Edinburgh when he meant Perth?"

"Not only that. He told Shona to-day that he'd gone to the cloakroom for his pipe, but I saw him in the gallery part of the library——"

He frowned. "Well, I don't suppose there's any reason why he shouldn't go there after he had fetched his pipe. Shona may have promised to lend him a book. Very likely, I should say. She was all over him."

"Yes—only—I sort of think somehow that he didn't want to be seen."

He grinned at her. "You have 'a lean and hungry look; you think too much'. It's all this talk of Hamish's about Uncle landing from the sea-plane that has put these daft ideas into your head."

"Niall—do you think we should mention to Uncle about having seen the colonel in Inverness?"

"Gosh, Alison!" he exclaimed in horror. "The first thing Uncle would say was how did we come to be in Inverness. Anyway, there's nothing really to tell. Wait till we know that the crook has definitely arrived and then we can begin to do our stuff."

When they reached home they parked the bike and went in to the house. It was very quiet, and when Alison called: "Coo-ee, Uncle!" it was Kirsty who appeared from the kitchen quarters.

"Yes—he is back. Your uncle is home these two hours since. But it is away to the Manse he is—him and Mr. Hamish—and Miss Mary too."

"Mary!" they exclaimed together. "Is she home?"

"Indeed and she is then. She was after coming with Rab in the mail van—all unexpected like."

"Return of the wanderers," said Niall. "And what have they all gone to the Manse for?"

A broad smile broke over Kirsty's face. "Ach well now, it was that daft Colin—he was after catching a salmon this morning and along he went and presented it to the minister."

"Poached it, I bet," laughed Niall. "I wonder where he got it."

"You can be asking him that yourself," said Kirsty. "Anyway, that is the reason for the supper party, and Mr. Campbell said I was to send you both along as soon as you came in. The minister invited you specially——"

"We'll just buzz off then, Kirsty."

"After you have washed, if you please," she replied with dignity.

"I say, Kirsty, chuck it. You'd think we were about ten."

"When it comes to going out tidy and smart it is nearer five I would say you are," she said severely, but with twinkling eyes.

"I wish you were coming with us, Kirsty," said Alison.

"Ach—it is not very fond of salmon that I am."

"And not very fond of Miss Scott either," teased Niall, as she went through to the kitchen. Going upstairs he leaned over the banisters and called loud enough for her to hear, in a perfect imitation of her soft Highland tones: "And you will not be forgetting to brush your hair, Miss Alison!"

They arrived at the Manse about half an hour later.

As they waited in the spotless porch for the door to be opened, Niall sent Alison into a fit of giggles by balancing himself on one foot in case he marked the well-scrubbed doorstep, and then when Miss Scott sharply swung the door inwards he all but fell against her in a mumbled apology that in spite of himself ended on a high note of laughter.

Miss Scott greeted them with her usual wintry smile. As always she wore a dress of dark-blue stuff. A large cameo brooch held her immaculate lace collar and her greying hair was parted exactly in the centre. Everything about the minister's housekeeper was painfully tidy; even her face seemed to be arranged so that it should not be easily upset by a sudden laugh. Indeed, the Campbells had never seen Miss Scott laugh—not really laugh. However, if they were not very keen on her as a person they adored the things she made to eat. Not even the cook at Clarig could produce more wonderful " eats " than this unattractive woman made at the Manse.

" I hope we're not late," Alison said shyly, as they stepped inside—being careful to avoid the highly-polished brass bar in the doorway.

Miss Scott shook her head. " The minister said the supper was to be kept till you came," she replied, with a disapproving click in her mouth. And with a watchful eye on their feet, for the hall also was aggressively clean and polished, she manœuvred them along to the study.

The Manse study possessed something of the same quality of shabby friendliness as did the sitting-room at the Cottage. Lots of comfy chairs and books, and nothing you had to be careful of spoiling. There was, too, a homey smell of tobacco. The chief difference was that there were no flowers, Alison thought—the Cottage was always full of flowers, and if there were no flowers there were twigs and branches. But perhaps a man didn't bother much about flowers.

After they had shaken hands with the minister, they had to greet their uncle and Mary, so for a few minutes everybody seemed to be talking at once. When the noise had been quelled somewhat, Mr. Murchison said: "You'd hear that daft Colin presented me with a salmon this morning?"

"Do you think he caught it on the Clarig?" asked Niall.

The minister raised his eyebrows. "I hope not, indeed. If I thought so I'd feel bound to send it along to Sir Angus with my compliments—particularly as I hear that he and his guests have not had much luck on the river, so far."

Mr. Campbell laughed. "We might enjoy it more if we did not inquire too closely as to where daft Colin landed it."

"Why look a gift salmon in the mouth," said Hamish, as they all trooped through to the dining-room.

It was a marvellous supper. Somehow, Miss Scott had laid hands on some early lettuce and radish and cucumber for the salad, and these, with lots of tomato and hard-boiled egg, made it look, as Mr. Campbell said, like a very handsome still life. It was not what the young Campbells called a "dinner" supper. There were no potatoes, but platefuls of brown and white bread, floury home-made scones and pancakes, and oatcakes newly off the girdle, and there was fizzy lemonade to drink. After that there was a trifle piled high with cream and yellow peaches resting on a bed of golden jelly.

" I took a chance and asked Miss Scott to make a trifle," said the minister. " I hope it's still your favourite sweet, Alison."

" It's all my favourite supper," breathed Alison happily. " And we had a huge tea with Shona, though you mightn't think so."

" I could eat trifle till the cows come home," said Niall, but after he had consumed a very large second helping, even he shook his head to a suggestion of fruit. " I wish I could!"

It had been a very gay, light-hearted meal, but once back in the study drinking coffee, the casual conversation died away and the atmosphere changed with the suddenness of the banging of a door. It wasn't just that nobody spoke, but rather that each one had personal private thoughts they did not want to speak aloud. Then Mr. Campbell, who had been stirring his coffee steadily for about five minutes, looked up at Alison and Niall, and said gravely: " I hear from Hamish that he has told you that the jewel hunt is on again."

" Yes, he said the crooks were here——"

" Not quite that, Niall. At least I don't think I said Clarig precisely. And I didn't say they were *here*, but that somebody was coming."

There was a moment of silence, then Mr. Campbell went on: " One of the gang is to finish the job up here, find the jewels in other words. I don't know if I mentioned it at the time, but the ones that are missing are the most valuable of the lot. The crook who is being sent is a specialist at his job—one of the top notchers. If he doesn't find them, then nobody will. He is "—smiling at Niall—" what Lord Peter Wimsey might call a master criminal. He'll stick at nothing."

He paused and felt for his pipe, and said solemnly: "I cannot emphasize this too much—he is completely in a class by himself. He knows all the gangster methods, he is slick and clever, would never be caught at a disadvantage, and he can adapt himself to any company. Now when we had the trouble with Ranald and Thomas last summer and you both helped us to finish off that affair, I promised that if anything of the kind should ever occur again I should at once tell you——"

"It's very good of you, Uncle," interrupted Niall, "to let us in on this."

"Just a minute," said Mr. Campbell. "I said to you that if any of the gang came north again I would let you choose whether you could lend a hand once more." He fumbled with his pipe. "But I'm going to take that promise back—for a short time at any rate."

The expectant look on Niall and Alison's faces gave way to puzzled disappointment.

"I'm sorry to do this. It's not that I don't want your help. I do, but I want it passively. That's to say, I want you both to be very alert and if you hear or see anything that strikes you as unusual, then you will pass it on either to me or to Hamish—or if it is more convenient, to Mr. Murchison. If you see any strangers, for instance——"

"We saw one to-day, Uncle," said Niall. "But he's a friend of the Clarig House people so I suppose he's okay. He was on the river this morning and he was lunching with Shona. His name is Colonel Macdonald and he was wearing the most poisonous kilt you could imagine—certainly not a Macdonald tartan."

Mr. Campbell's reply was disappointing. "Macdonald? Yes, I know about him. He is a distant relation of my friend James Macdonald of Edinburgh. I heard he was coming north to Sutherland this spring. However, if you are suspicious of anybody at all I count on you both to tell me." At last his pipe was going, and he puffed for a minute or two before he said: "Now, Niall, at this stage there is no need for you to be trying out any of your Lord Peter Wimsey stuff. If there is anything you and Alison ought to know, I shall tell you. Meantime, the best advice I can give you is to be the essence of discretion—no matter where you are, you cannot be too careful."

"Curb your usual brilliance and be stupidly pleasant," smiled the minister.

"They can both play that rôle without any trouble," said Hamish. "After all the practice they've had."

Alison and Niall nodded. They knew there was no appeal from this decision of Mr. Campbell's, but they could not hide their disappointment. Niall plucked up his courage. "Uncle, couldn't you tell us something about the sea-plane? It's a bit of an adventure to come to Clarig like that, but it's a bit dud for us not to know anything about it."

Mr. Campbell smiled blankly and blew some smoke into the air. "It went back to its base after it dropped me in Treasure Bay."

"Where is its base?"

"For the time being—Oban."

"Is that where you came from?"

Their uncle hesitated, and then said: "N-no. I didn't come from Oban." While Hamish muttered under his breath: "I always said Niall ought to go in for law."

But Niall was not discouraged. "Where *did* you come from?" he persisted. But this time Mr. Campbell rose, with a definite air of closing the discussion. "I promise to tell you that some day but not to-night." He glanced round the room as if marshalling his family together, then smiled at the minister. "Time we were off, Murch."

Mr. Murchison followed them out to the hall. "I have to call and see old Sandy so I'll walk along the road with you. It is a beautiful evening."

Alison and Niall walked a little behind the others. "Isn't Uncle the bally limit! After promising us he'd tell us if anything happened, he puts us off as usual. I must say I'm surprised at Uncle. I always thought he'd keep his word. Report if we hear or see anything exciting, indeed! As if we had a chance to hear or see anything. When he began I was sure he was going to spill the beans. Huh! I might have known."

Alison, not so passionately interested in adventure as her brother, was half relieved on her own account and half sorry on his. "Well, as he has definitely forbidden us there's not much we can do about it, except grin and bear it. Anyway, you were right about the colonel. He's quite ordinary after all."

He plucked a slender branch from a tree and began stripping its bark. "I wonder," he said, with a curious smile. "I'm not just too sure about that——"

"But Uncle knows who he is."

"He said he was a relation of James Macdonald of Edinburgh—and who is he, I'd like to know? If he's a friend of Uncle's, I never heard of him before. It sounded to me more like a name made up on the spur of the moment, if you ask me. Did you notice how quickly he replied to me when I mentioned the colonel's name—as if he'd been waiting for me to bring it up and had his story all ready. No, Alis, I now think you weren't so dumb as I imagined. Anyway, even if you are wrong, from now on—till something better turns up at any rate—we'll keep a friendly eye on the colonel with the yellow kilt."

"But, Niall, maybe Uncle does know him—not the colonel, but his friend. Don't you remember, when the men were talking in Duncan's garage, I heard one of them tell his pal that that was where his friend, Campbell, garaged his car?"

"Alison, you're off the track. It's the Macdonald in Edinburgh that Uncle knows. And I'm just thinking —Uncle speaks of one man coming north. But there were two men in the garage."

"There were. But there seems to be only one now."

CHAPTER V

The Golf Competition

It was Saturday, the day of the golf competition. It had been a marvellous day, and everything had gone perfectly. Sir Angus had decided to make it a Stroke competition, with himself and Mr. Murchison and Hamish and his uncle to fix the handicaps.

Positively everybody who had ever handled a golf club was there, and some of the scores handed in had been most surprising. Both Sir Angus and Mr. Campbell, who had been scratch golfers when they were young, were well down the list, Hamish and the minister tied for second place and it was Rab, who had only recently taken up golf, who was the winner among the men. Mary was the best lady, but neither Alison nor Niall nor Shona were near the top; indeed, Shona was very near the bottom, but she did not mind that so long as the Campbells didn't win either.

Niall grinned at Alison as he heard Shona say to the colonel: " Uncle said it wouldn't do if I were to win so he gave me a very low handicap."

" Funny the colonel didn't win," said Alison. " I thought he'd be sure to."

" I believe he lost so many balls that he tore up his card," said Niall. " He told me his wife is a very keen player but she's still ill, poor soul."

As some of the competitors had to return to their work before all the scores were handed in—Rab, for instance, to drive the mail van to meet the train at the Junction—it was arranged that everybody should gather again at Clarig House in the evening, when the prizes would be presented and there would be an informal supper.

Shona had asked the Campbells to come early, and when they arrived they saw about a dozen chairs arranged in a semicircle in front of the house, with a table draped in a white tablecloth, and on this the prizes were displayed.

" Isn't this exciting, Niall! It looks like a wedding."

" Huh! I've never been to a wedding where they give you a prize for coming. Wish they did. It would help to make up for having to go. Oh, hello, Shona," as she came forward. " How posh you look, all dressed up like that."

Alison glanced down at her blazer and kilt. " I'm afraid we never thought of changing out of our golfing things."

" That's all right," said Shona amiably. " Mummie said I'd better put on a frock seeing I was presenting the prizes." She smoothed down the pleats of her accordion skirt. " Do you like it, Alison?"

" It's smashing. I love that shade of green."

" The colonel says it's the colour of spring, and you needn't giggle, Niall. I think it was a very nice thing to say. He won't be here this evening—isn't it a shame? He had to go home because of his wife—she's in bed, you know. Did you happen to see him play? His drives go about a mile——"

" Gosh! I've just thought of something," said Niall.

" What?"

" That's why Uncle and Sir Angus were off their game to-day. They were dazzled by the yellow kilt."

"Don't be cheeky. The colonel's a great friend of ours. Mummie says he's charming."

The chairs at the door were now being filled up and Niall said to Shona: "Better buzz off to your seat among the mighty, or someone else will present the prizes before you get there."

"Don't you believe it," she said, beaming. This was the kind of occasion that thoroughly appealed to her idea of self-importance, and she looked completely happy as she joined the platform party—her mother and Sir Angus, Mr. Campbell and Mary, and the Macleods of Tigh-an-eas.

"There's Sallie over there," said Alison. "Let's go and squat beside her," but as they pushed their way through the small groups clustered around, Shona beckoned to Alison. "Uncle has left the list of prize-winners on the top of his desk in the library. Would you dash in——?"

"Yes, of course." She ran up the wide sweep of shallow steps to the front door and crossed the hall. It was very still in here in contrast to the buzz of voices from without. This part of the house had changed very little in appearance since the days when it belonged to her Aunt Hester, for some of her furniture was still here, and yet the feeling of the place was quite different. She could not have expressed it in words, but it was as if the new laird had somehow impressed his personality on the house although it still looked the same as when it had had a different owner.

All this went through her mind in a flash, and almost in the same second she had the impression that she was not alone here. She did not actually see anyone, she heard no movement, but she had a sudden awareness of a lurking shadow to the left, along the passage that led to the flower room. She didn't like to say, " Anybody there?" for it might have been one of the servants, though she knew most of them were outside watching the proceedings. But she did clear her throat and gave an inquiring cough. But there was no response, and without lingering she ran to the library and was back again immediately carrying the slip of paper Sir Angus had asked for.

Shona was a great success when she rose to present the prizes. Rab received a beautiful new golf bag, putters were presented to Hamish and Mr. Murchison, and Mary and Jessie, the young daughter of Donald, the keeper, had handbags. But all the time Sir Angus was reading out the names and as each prize-winner stepped forward, Alison was thinking about the mysterious shadowy person in the hall. Who could it be?

Later, however, when Rab had called for three cheers for the laird and for " Miss Shona, who had presented the prizes so graciously ", and when everybody had enjoyed a buffet supper and the village people had gone home, and only the Campbells and Mr. Murchison were left, Alison forgot about that lurking shadow, whatever it had been.

" Come upstairs to my room, Alison," said Shona. " I want to show you the new enamelled brushes Uncle gave me for my birthday."

Alison touched them admiringly, as they were laid out on the dressing-table. " Oh, you are lucky—they're simply super. Two brushes, too! I've been wanting some like that for ages."

" Get Mr. Campbell to give you a set for *your* birthday. I'll ask Uncle where he got mine if you like." Alison smiled and said nothing. Shona did not realize that what was possible for her was out of the question for her friend. She gave the dressing-table a little shove. "Somebody must have been moving this—it's right away from the light. And the chair too. It'd be Polly, I expect. She always does my room."

As they were about to go downstairs, Shona said, picking up a flattish box from the bed: "I mustn't forget to give you this. It's some golf balls for you and Niall. I was telling Uncle about the old crocks you were using, so he said to let you have these——"

"Shona! But how terribly kind. That's wizard. Niall will be thrilled. We must thank Sir Angus——"

"Thank me if you like. I told Uncle he jolly well ought to. He's got millions of balls tucked away that he'll never use."

Alison linked her arm through Shona's as they went down the broad staircase together. "Well, I do thank you—awfully—but I must thank him too."

"Goodness, it's nothing," Shona said lightly, and Alison thought that when Shona was at her best, as now, nobody could be nicer.

The sun was glowing red in the sea when at last they began to talk of leaving. Everybody was thanking Sir Angus for his kindness in planning the competition and giving such beautiful prizes. "I think we might do the same every year," he said.

"I should be delighted to present a silver cup for the best score," began Mr. Campbell, when Sir Angus interrupted: "But didn't you hear? The colonel has already promised to give one. We couldn't get it in time for to-day, but to-morrow I am to ring up the jeweller in Inverness and tell them to have Rab's name inscribed on it before it is sent on, and he'll keep it for the year."

"How kind of the colonel!" said Mr. Murchison. "Sorry I didn't see more of him to-day."

"You'll see him to-morrow," said Shona. "He's coming to church with us."

"Pity about his wife being ill," Mary said to Mrs. Lessing.

"Yes, I believe she has been in bed since they arrived at Achnamara. I've been meaning to go and call, but the colonel says better to wait for a little yet."

"They haven't been here very long, have they?" asked Niall.

"Just a few days, but Sir Angus took a good deal to do with arranging the let and engaged a couple to look after them, and had the house fired for them. So naturally we feel that we know them quite well already——"

"You didn't know them before they came, then?" said Mary.

"No, but we have several friends in common and the colonel is a very delightful man, and so devoted to his wife."

It was late when they reached home, so Alison and Niall went straight upstairs. At the door of her room she said: "Come into my room for a minute, Niall. I want to talk to you."

He yawned and sat down on the end of her bed. "I wish I'd won that first prize. I'm glad Rab got it, of course, but I could just have been doing with a bag like that."

Just then she was not interested in golf. "Listen, Niall, tell me what you think about this. I don't suppose it's important, but when Shona sent me in for the prize list I had the queerest feeling when I was crossing the hall that there was somebody tiptoeing about."

He yawned again. "A servant probably. Didn't you see?"

"No, I didn't see anybody at all."

"Well, if you think it was the crook I shouldn't imagine that's the kind of thing he'd be doing. Your imagination is doing overtime."

"But there's another thing. When I went up with Shona to her room somebody had been shifting the furniture about."

He frowned. "D'you mean the place was in a mess?"

She shook her head. "Oh no, not so bad as that. It was only the dressing-table and a chair that had been moved. Shona thought it must have been the housemaid, Polly."

"Of course it would be Polly. Who else could it be?"

Alison found this very discouraging. She felt that the things she had told Niall were more important than they sounded, but he looked entirely unconvinced.

He rose and stretched himself. "Well, you can't blame the colonel for hiding about in the hall anyhow. He'd gone home hours before that."

"I know he *said* he was going away——"

"Oh, Alis, for the love of Mike! I heard Sir Angus tell Hamish that he'd rung up just before we arrived this evening. How could he be both there and at Clarig House?"

"I expect I've added up two and two and made six."

But she looked a little worried and Niall felt he had been rather brusque. "It looks a bit like it! And even if you are right there's nothing we can do except what we are already doing—keeping an eye on the kilted colonel and watching our own step."

" It's awfully funny how we haven't seen his friend, the other man who was with him in Inverness."

" Perhaps the colonel killed him with a golf ball," he said facetiously. A door downstairs creaked. " That's Uncle. I'm off to bye-byes. 'Night."

Next morning being Sunday, the Campbells as usual went to church. The small kirk of Clarig was built on a high rocky knoll above a sharp sea promontory, just beyond the last of the houses in the village. A small graveyard surrounded it, and at this time of year when the spring tides ran high, the sea boomed unceasingly against the rocks.

But this morning it was bright and sunny, and the waves splashed against the rocks almost as gently and playfully as they did in summer, and as the Campbells walked along the shore road they saw Sir Angus's shining black Rolls drawn up at the narrow church gate. Alongside, and also black but not shining, stood the shabby car of Colonel Macdonald. The old bell was ringing, with its curious clanging sound that ended so abruptly after each note that it seemed as if each peal must be the last. Alison glanced up at the belfry where it swung to and fro, and wondered for how many years it had been rung like this each Sunday—a hundred years at least, she supposed, for the church itself was much older than that.

Miss Scott passed them quickly, clutching her Bible tightly under her arm and throwing a stiff Sundayish sort of bow in their direction as she edged before them through the gate. Old Sandy with his collie, who always waited patiently on the church steps for his master till the service was over, was already at the door as they threaded their way along the curving path among the worn gravestones, some of them crooked and standing at such an angle that they looked as if they must topple over. Many of them were so overgrown with moss that it was impossible to decipher the lettering that had been chiselled on them.

As she followed her uncle and Mary down the aisle, Alison unconsciously sniffed, and wondered for the hundredth time why all churches should smell the same. Big ones and little ones, town ones and country ones, they were all alike. It wasn't just a tiny Highland kirk like this—St. Giles, in Edinburgh, had the same churchy smell, and so had a London church she had gone to once, when she was staying with Aunt Kate. Could it be a mixture of bibles and hymn books and hassocks and people's best clothes, and perhaps the slight stuffiness caused by the church not being opened very often? But it couldn't be that, for some houses were shut for long spells, yet they smelled quite differently.

The bell stopped ringing as the Campbells reached the long pew under the pulpit, and Alison glanced back at the laird's pew at the far side of the church. It was a huge pew with a door to it and a table inside, almost like a small room, and it was very full this morning with Sir Angus and his fishing guests, Shona and her mother, and, at the end, Colonel Donald Macdonald. Shona smiled. It was a polite restrained sort of smile and it made her appear unfamiliar, not really like the Shona they knew on weekdays.

The postmistress, who had been playing a voluntary on the tiny harmonium, folded up her music and arranged a hymn book instead, and Rab, in his black beadle's clothes looking strangely unlike the jolly postman who drove the mail van each day to the Junction and played the pipes at the Cottage parties, carried the big Bible up to the pulpit. His black boots squeaked as he went. They always did, and when Alison was a small girl she had imagined that they were specially intended to squeak.

Then Rab retired, to reappear almost immediately followed by the minister in his black gown and white hood. He, too, looked different in church. When he visited them at the Cottage or fished the river with them, or joined in their picnics or played golf, he was just like a terribly nice uncle, or even an older brother. But now his face was serious and solemn, and as he stood there, so straight and dignified, you simply could not imagine his being anything but a minister.

It was a short service—one of the things Alison and Niall appreciated about Mr. Murchison was that he never preached long sermons!—and after it was over the Campbells and the Macleods and the Clarig House people stood about outside in the warm sunshine in little groups, discussing yesterday's golf competition.

" Wasn't it super!" said Shona, beaming all round. Then she pointed to a little gold brooch in her beret, in a design of two golf clubs with a pearl ball set between them. " Look what Uncle gave me for presenting the prizes."

Sallie Macleod bent forward to examine it. " It's lovely, Shona. I think it's the same as one Mummie has."

" Uncle bought this one in London—it was frightfully expensive."

Sallie, who wasn't so good at standing up to Shona as Niall was, smiled a little uncomfortably as she said: " Well, I don't suppose Mummie's was. She bought it in Inverness one day when she'd forgotten her tie-pin."

Shona turned to Niall. " Uncle says he's going to make his golf course public from now on. It'll be a real club and anybody can play who wants to."

"How wizard!" said Sallie. "I'll be along every day to practise. I adore golf."

"Jolly sporting of Sir Angus," said Niall. "I'll take you on one day if you like, Shona. Play you level."

"Oh no, you won't, thank you. But I'll *fish* you level if you want."

Sallie went off with her parents and the colonel approached the Campbells. "I have been suggesting to Shona that she should come up and try my loch one of these days," he said pleasantly, "and I shall be delighted if you two will come with her. You could come and have tea with my wife and myself afterwards."

"Thank you very much, sir. My sister and I will be very pleased to come."

"That is excellent. Shona will let you know which day is most suitable." He nodded and turned to Mr. Murchison, who had been talking to old Sandy. Alison moved on towards the gate with Shona, and Niall, uncertain whether to go or stay, decided he might as well remain with the colonel and the minister.

There was always the chance that, if Alison's suspicions were correct, the colonel might let slip something of interest. But after a few minutes Niall was wondering if it would be rude if he left them, for of all things to discuss, the tenant of Achnamara was asking questions that had to do with church law. Niall glanced about him. All the other groups seemed complete and deep in conversation, so he allowed his attention to wander, and it was not till Mr. Murchison began to lead the way down the path that he realized they were now speaking of ancient tombstones, and that the colonel was asking if he might come along to the church one day and examine the churchyard.

" Most certainly," said the minister cordially. " I'm afraid the place is kept locked during the week, but if you ring me up before you come, I shall come down with pleasure and take you round."

" I shouldn't like to put you to all that trouble——"

" No trouble at all. My Manse is just behind that clump of trees. But if I didn't happen to be free Rab would conduct you anywhere you wanted to go. And although the inscriptions on the stones may be hidden by the moss, his family have lived here for generations and he knows all about them. As much as I do, if not more. Better not make it to-morrow though. Neither Rab nor myself will be available."

" I shan't come without ringing you up," said the colonel. " Some of the stones look extremely old."

" They are. Very old. Interesting too. Some smugglers were buried here." Mr. Murchison smiled at Niall as he spoke, and without meaning to, Niall said: " ' Yo ho ho and a bottle of rum!' "

The minister laughed, and the colonel smiled in a slightly bewildered fashion and murmured that he wanted to speak to Mrs. Lessing. " She kindly suggested that I should go back and have lunch with them, but my wife——"

" How is she?" asked the minister.

" A little better. But she was ill before she left Edinburgh—skin trouble—and contact with the air makes it worse, so she can't get out at all."

They shook hands and at last the small groups had all dispersed, and the Campbells turned along towards the Cottage, Alison and Niall lingering a little behind the others.

" Some people look different on Sundays, but not the colonel," she said, laughing.

" Perhaps he only has one kilt." He giggled. " No wonder his wife is ill."

" You seemed to be having a very interesting conversation with him. What were you talking about?"

" Heavy stuff to begin with. I couldn't be bothered listening. You wouldn't think a man like the colonel would be interested in the way churches are run and how they ' call ' ministers—but he seems to be. I was dying to get away. Then at the end he switched over and began asking questions about the grave-stones."

" Poor Mr. Murchison!"

" Oh, I don't suppose he minded. You know how he likes anybody who asks about the church, and he offered to show the colonel round one day and explain the writing on the tombstones——"

" Niall——!" she exclaimed sharply and then stopped.

" Cough it up. What are you trying to say?"

" Nothing—just—isn't it curious that *all* the members of the gang who've been at Clarig have been interested in old churches and houses and caves? Guy and the professor and Ranald and Thomas—all of them. And now here comes the colonel and he has the same sort of idea."

He kicked a stone along the road. " One thing about Mr. Murchison surprised me. He told the colonel that some old smugglers were buried in the churchyard. I should have thought—knowing a crook was somewhere in the neighbourhood—that he'd have kept off that subject. He also said that sometimes the smugglers hid things in the churches that were near the sea."

" Could the jewels be hidden under one of the flat tombstones, I wonder?" she said thoughtfully.

" Search me. But I'm sure Mr. Murchison can't think so or he'd have steered the colonel on to another tack."

" Unless—like Uncle—he's absolutely sure that the colonel's okay."

" Do you think we should mention this to Uncle or Hamish?" she asked presently.

" Why should we? If Mr. Murchison has any suspicions he's sure to pass them on. And didn't Uncle tell us to keep our mouths shut and look as innocent as possible?"

" I still can't understand where the other man has got to—the colonel's friend."

" Listen, Alis—and don't bite my nose off when you hear what I'm going to say—I suppose you're absolutely sure and positive that the colonel is the same man you saw in Inverness? If he is he certainly doesn't appear to have recognized you."

" I don't think he noticed me at all. They were both so busy discussing their car, and their backs were partly turned. But of course I'm sure, Niall. Besides, they drove out Clarig way, and though it wasn't the colonel who borrowed the jack I knew it was one of them. And there's the car——"

" There are lots of cars that look pretty well alike."

" Yes, but I saw its number. Niall, I know you think I'm daft to suspect the colonel, but who else is there that could possibly be mixed up with the gang. Uncle talked about the crook coming to Sutherland, but he must have meant Clarig or somewhere near, and there aren't any other strangers that we've heard about."

" Well, Shona is so friendly with the colonel that she's sure to know all he's doing. It might be an idea to tag on to her and see if we can learn anything." They were nearly home now and they slowed down a little as he said: " And if Colonel Donald Macdonald was really in earnest about asking us to go along to Achnamara that might be useful too."

" Niall, when you speak to someone with a double name like that, do you have to say ' Mrs. Donald Macdonald ' every time you say anything?"

He giggled. " Uncle once told me that when you're presented, or whatever you call it, to the king, and he talks to you, you just say ' sir ', but Shona said the colonel was very hot on the ' Donald Macdonald ', so I suppose he expects the whole shooting match every time."

" I wonder what's for dinner," said Alison, as they turned in at the gate.

" You're like your namesake, Alis. You take ' a great interest in questions of eating and drinking '." Then added: " ' What say you to a piece of beef and mustard?' And in case you don't know, that *is* a quotation."

She was unimpressed. " I'm starving. Going to church always makes me hungry."

CHAPTER VI

Is the Colonel a Crook?

"I wish the Macleods had asked Niall and me to go and fish," Alison said rather disgruntedly the next morning, as she watched Hamish go carefully over his book of flies.

"I never even knew they'd got the rights of that other hill loch," said Niall.

"I'll put in a good word for you," said Hamish, "but as far as to-day's concerned, if they had asked you, you'd have had to fish from the bank—they've only got two boats. They'll have one and Uncle and Mary and myself the other one."

"I wouldn't have minded fishing from the bank—not on that loch. I don't suppose it's been fished for years. It's so far away from anywhere. And I bet it's simply hoaching with fish."

Hamish smiled at Niall's gloomy tones. "There's always the burn."

"And it's the only place," said Alison. "Uncle says the Clarig House people are fishing the river."

"What about the golf course?" Hamish reminded them. "As a family, we didn't put up too good a show on Saturday."

"No," said Alison doubtfully. "I wonder if Shona is going on the Clarig——"

"And the yellow-kilted colonel—will he be there?"

"Personally I do not find remarks like that amusing," said Mr. Campbell, coming into the room just then. He spoke in his most uncle-ish tones and Niall grinned apologetically. " Sorry, Uncle."

" Shall I go and telephone Shona?" suggested Alison.

Kirsty came through the hall in time to hear Alison's remark. " Rab is just after being here and he is telling me that Miss Shona and her mother are away along the Chiarmhor road on their horses."

Alison sighed and went through the french window to the garden. If only Shona would lend her a horse just now and again! Shona knew how keen she was on riding. Niall followed her outside. " Have you ever heard of a word ' baulked ' at your school? Because that's what we are. We can't go to the Macleods' loch, we can't go on the river, we can't find out what the colonel's up to—I'd forgotten that he doesn't fish or I wouldn't have given Uncle the chance to snub me."

" And we can't go riding," she said, so mournfully that Niall said: " Bad luck for us to have such high-falutin' tastes and be born poor. I wish I had a car or a plane and you wish you had a horse."

Hamish crossed the lawn behind them. " I wonder what Uncle wishes *he* had." They turned to him in surprise as he said: " Whatever it is he could have had it if he hadn't had to look after the hungry young Campbells." They stared at him. " Yes, I mean it. I tell you one thing that I know he's given up because of us—a yacht! He was mad on sailing when he was young, and he'd have had one but for the money he's had to spend on school fees and fishing-rods and bikes and golf clubs and the rest."

Niall looked uncomfortable. " I never thought about that."

" Is there anything we can do?" said Alison. " Poor old Uncle!"

" I don't imagine Uncle is sorry for himself in the least. I've never heard him so much as hint that he was, but he might be if he heard you two grousing because you haven't private planes and horses of your own. It shouldn't take me to tell you that I can't think of another family in Sutherland—and I bet you can't either!—who've had such a good time as we've had."

He picked up a stone and threw it on to the beach, then grinned at them suddenly. " Here endeth the first lesson. Sorry to inflict all this on you, but I happen to know that Uncle is a bit browned-off just now. He's been away for this long spell on a hush-hush job and he was hoping to have a spot of peace when he came home. Instead of that, he has to face up to searching for this gangster."

" So you want us to promise to be good children! Okay! We'll say good-bye to all that—cars and planes and the rest. 'O farewell! farewell the neighing steed . . .' "

Hamish laughed. " An apt quotation for once, Niall!" and went inside. Later on, when they were practising iron shots on the firm stretch of sand opposite the cottage, Niall said: " I wonder what Hamish was getting at, letting loose all that sob stuff about Uncle."

" Well, he told us, didn't he? He didn't want us to worry Uncle."

" I think there was more to it than that. He was trying to warn us to keep off the grass—in other words, to let the old colonel bird alone."

" But he didn't even mention the colonel."

" No, but Hamish knows there isn't anybody about Clarig who just now could possibly be this big shot crook, except the colonel. Uncle has warned us not to get mixed up in this business, but he must be pretty sure that we'll do all we can. Therefore, my dear Watson, 'quod erat demonstrandum'!"

"Maybe," she said with unusual brightness. "It's not the quod erat thing. Perhaps it's 'pons asinorum'."

"Meaning we've bitten off more than we can chew? Amo, amas, amat. Your knowledge of Latin astounds me." He drove a long low ball along the edge of the sea. "I wouldn't care about its being the pons asinorum so long as it was the right pons. Then we could have a stab at crossing it."

"Sounds a bit too involved for me."

"Well, it was you who started it."

He stooped to tee up another ball, and she stood at the water's edge pressing her feet on the wet sand till a dry circle appeared round them, then jumping back before the next wave rolled in. It was a typical West Highland spring day—clear and sunny with a brisk westerly breeze blowing in from the sea, and bringing a salty tang with it, and white billowy clouds like bulging cotton-wool scurrying across the sky. Alison's kilt flapped gently against her legs as she stood gazing out to sea. She was thinking that if she had a pony of her own she would canter every morning along the sands, with a gallop to finish up. Niall's voice interrupted her.

"Let's go up to the golf course and have a round with one club. We can do the nine holes twice."

So without going back to the house, they left the beach and crossed the road to the moor. Protected as it was by high hills from the north, the glen was a very sheltered spot, and after they had played ten holes of very bad golf Niall pointed to a heathery slope. "I don't know about you, but I've had enough. Let's go and squat up there for a bit. Have you any chocolate?"

She produced a brown sticky mess from her blazer pocket, and disentangled part of it. "It was chocolate —once."

"So long as we know," he said, putting it all into his mouth at once. He settled himself comfortably on the springy heather. "This is better than golf."

"But fishing would have been better still," said Alison.

From where they sat they could see on one side the gleam of the river beyond the glen as it flowed down to Loch Clarig, and down to their left across the road they had an excellent view of the burn. A car hummed down the hill road on its way to the village.

Niall leaned forward. "If I didn't know they had gone to fish, I'd say that was the Macleods' car."

Alison, whose gaze had been fixed far to the south where she could just make out the northern end of Skye, turned and looked down.

"It's not the Macleods' car, Niall, it's the colonel—I can make him out."

"Wonder where he's off to. Hope he hasn't gone to the Cottage." They watched while the car disappeared behind the houses in the village and then reappeared travelling south. "Looks as if he's going to Chiarmhor." They could still see it quite plainly, a small black object and going pretty fast. They lost it for a minute. "Can't be going to Chiarmhor after all."

"Look, Niall," she said sharply. "It has stopped at the church—you can hardly see it for the wall, but it's there."

"The church? Mm! I see it. Gosh, that's funny, Alis! Mr. Murchison said he couldn't be there to-day —nor Rab either."

Alison pointed. "There he is—it's the colonel all right. See—he's going up the churchyard path."

"What on earth is the big idea? 'Curiouser and curiouser.' The one day that Mr. Murchison warns him not to come is the very day he chooses."

"He's gone round to the back of the church. I thought you said it was the tombstones he was interested in—he has walked past them all and hasn't looked at one of them. There's nothing at the back, is there, Niall, except the door that leads to the vestry and the cellars of course?"

"There's certainly nothing round there that an ordinary visitor would be excited about." He frowned, and neither of them said anything for a minute, then he jumped up. "I wonder if he thinks the jewels might be hidden in the cellars. And they might be, you know, Alison. Mr. Murchison did say to him yesterday that sometimes the smugglers made use of the churches to hide their stuff in, especially the churches that were near the sea. I thought at the time it was rather silly to tell the colonel."

"But if that's his idea, you'd think he wouldn't leave his car outside the church gate for anybody to see."

"Oh, I don't know. The church is right off the main road. You don't pass it going anywhere. You can't see it from the village. About the only place it's overlooked from is here where we're sitting and perhaps that small side window at the Manse. Anyway, any of the people who might be suspicious—ourselves, Mr. Murchison or the Macleods—are all well out of the way—or so he thinks."

"What should we do, then?"

"Not much we can do except just stay here till we see him leave. And I think we'll move down just a shade. I have an idea that we're more or less against the skyline just now, and we don't want him to look up and see us."

They moved a little way down the hillside and had just got settled when Alison exclaimed: " Look—there he is!" They could see him distinctly come round the corner of the little kirk, walking very smartly and not pausing for a minute, as he hurried out to his car. " He doesn't seem awfully interested in the inscriptions, does he?"

" He hasn't wasted much time on the job, whatever it was. I wonder if he found what he was looking for." In the clear air they heard the firm bang of the car door as it was slammed, and in a few minutes it had passed through the village again and was climbing back up the hill road. They watched it as it passed the lodge gates without stopping, and listened to its hum grow fainter as it chugged up the curve beyond and then disappeared.

" Curtain falls on the first act," said Niall, getting to his feet. " I'd like to know how Mr. Murchison reacts to this, when he hears about it."

At supper that evening Niall said to his uncle very casually: " Colonel Macdonald was visiting the church this morning."

Alison imagined that there was the smallest pause, but when it came, Mr. Campbell's reply was disappointing. He simply replied briefly: " Really? I gathered from Mr. Murchison that he was interested in churches and tombstones."

And before Niall could do more than say, " Yes, I suppose he is," Mary had turned the talk quite naturally to the sport they'd had that day.

As soon as they had finished their meal he said to Alison: " Come on and have a look at the river." Then as soon as they were outside he said: " Isn't Uncle maddening! He'll neither tell you anything nor is he interested in anything you tell him."

" He certainly didn't seem at all excited about the colonel," she said, pulling a scarf round her neck. " I wonder what he really thinks."

" I think there are three possibles. First, that he believes the colonel to be okay and that he's got nothing to do with the gang. Second, he may be waiting for definite instructions from the Secret Service people and may not know any more than we do who the mysterious Mr. X is. Or third, he *may* suspect the colonel—he may be jolly sure he is the man he's after, and is determined to keep you and me out of it all. And I hate to say it, but I think number three is the most likely."

" But Mr. X, as you call him, may be in another part of Sutherland. Didn't Uncle say as much?"

" If he did, it was only to put us off the scent. Clarig is where all the excitement has been up to now. The other jewels were found here, so what would be the sense in the gang sending their top notcher to hunt for the others somewhere else? Besides, if he weren't somewhere near here, would Uncle stick around? I don't think he would, and that alone makes me think you were right in suspecting the colonel."

" Why shouldn't we ask Uncle right out whether he's the man or not?"

" Oh, he'd wriggle round it, not tell us. You know how he did before when we asked him. And "—he sniggered—" we can't very well say to him: ' Now on your word of honour, Uncle——' "

There was a determined twist to her mouth. "All the same, I think I shall have a try."

"Try if you like, but you won't get anything out of him."

But as it happened Niall was wrong.

That evening, as they were sitting in the lounge, Alison said, during a lull in the conversation: "Uncle, would you mind if I asked you something?"

He smiled at her through a haze of tobacco smoke. "Go ahead."

"Colonel Macdonald is the only stranger around Clarig just now—is he the crook you want to catch?"

If he hesitated, it was for the merest fraction of a second, and when he spoke his voice was completely reassuring. "That is a very easy question, Alison. The answer, as they say in Parliament, is in the negative."

"That means 'no', Alison," said Niall pertly.

She nodded, not certain whether to be glad or sorry. Everything had pointed to the colonel, but if he weren't Mr. X, then who could be? And where could he be, for surely he wasn't at Clarig.

When she discussed it with Niall the following morning he was sceptical. "I still think the colonel is the man we're after."

"But Uncle said definitely that he wasn't."

"It's just possible that Uncle, clever and all as he is, has made a mistake."

She appeared worried. "If that's true, then oughtn't we to tell him what we know?"

"We don't *know* anything, Alison, we only suspect. Uncle would probably be frightfully amused. Anyway, he hasn't treated us too well over this. He promised he'd let us in on anything that turned up—and then when he had news of Mr. X he just talked kindly to us as if we were about six."

"Suppose we tell Hamish, then? Make him promise not to say anything."

"Be your age, Alis. If Hamish thought we knew something that Uncle ought to know he'd *have* to tell him. Even I see that. So if you're set on telling Hamish, just say the word and I'll go and talk to Uncle—confess my sins, beginning with the day we pinched the car."

She said nothing. Certainly the business of the car made an unpleasant complication and meant landing Niall in for a heap of trouble.

"One thing," said Niall, "they can't blame us afterwards for not saying anything when Uncle has told us point-blank that the colonel is not his man."

During the next few days they found out nothing more. They had a day on the river with Shona, but for once they caught nothing at all; they golfed, but a sudden gale of wind and rain sprang up and Alison lost three balls and returned home in not too good a temper; they went for a day's tramp among the hills with Mr. Campbell, an annual event they looked forward to during the Easter holidays, but this time he was quiet and abstracted and not the good companion he usually was. Still another day they climbed the Pudding Bowl, but the mist came down and they had no view at all. And to make matters completely dud, there was no news whatsoever of the colonel except a polite note postponing Alison and Niall's visit to Achnamara as his wife was still ill.

Then all at once things began to happen again. Apart from the day they had spent with her on the river, they had seen very little of Shona. She seemed to have lost her new-found enthusiasm for golf and went out riding most days with her mother.

By now Alison's bicycle was mended. A new inner tube had come from Inverness and Rab had fitted it, so for lack of something better to do she and Niall decided to cycle along the narrow shore road—it was little more than a track, really—to Ashnish.

" We can come home by Clarig House and that means we can free-wheel all the way down the hill," she said.

Niall sighed. " I don't know why these wretched people who are staying with Sir Angus don't go and fish somebody else's rivers for a change. We've hardly had any fishing on the Clarig these hols. I bet Shona's browned-off."

" Still, she has her pony," began Alison.

" And we have our bikes," laughed Niall, " as Hamish would remind us if he were here."

The road beyond Loch Clarig was rutty and uneven, and they had to walk a good part of the way, so they wheeled their cycles from the track to the turf, which was soft and easy to walk on. They were just about to remount when they heard galloping hoofs coming towards them, and Shona appeared. She reined in.

" A heavenly morning for riding," she said, looking down on them.

" We haven't done much riding," said Alison. " We'd forgotten this road was so bad."

" I meant riding a horse."

" It's lovely doing anything on a morning like this," said Niall. " Why are you out alone?"

" At the last minute Mummie didn't want to come. If I'd only thought, Alison, you might have come instead and had her horse. She's quite quiet. Where are you going anyway?"

Niall patted his pocket. " We thought we might explore the country round Ashnish. I've got a map here."

" That sounds exciting. I might come and meet you on your way back. Are you coming home the same road?"

" Depends which way we go," Niall said annoyingly. " By the way, how is your friend the colonel? Been along there fishing yet?"

" 'Course not. We can't go till Mrs. Donald Macdonald is better. He's awfully upset about it."

" About your not going or about his wife being ill?" asked Niall.

" Idiot! About not being able to have me along, of course. I don't think he's been away from Achnamara all week—we haven't seen him at all. It's a shame. I'm dying to fish his loch too."

" Like to fish the burn to-morrow?" asked Alison.

" I think I'm going on the Clarig with Uncle. His guests are going off in the morning. Tell you what—if I'm not fishing I'll give you a ring and you could come and have tea. You too, Niall."

Alison nodded and said she'd love to, but Niall said he had arranged a game of golf, so with a " See you to-morrow, then," Shona rode off.

" So sorry I didn't think of asking you to go riding with me, Alison," Niall said, in an exact imitation of Shona's voice. " And if I had only thought, Niall, that you would care to fish the Clarig——"

" What did you mean when you said you had a map and we were going to explore?"

" I did think we might have a look at Achnamara. It's not so very much farther than Ashnish. But if the colonel would only hurry up with his invitation, it would seem much more natural if we went along there with Shona to fish."

They ate their lunch on a flat rock by the water's edge, near to the Lodge where they had had such exciting adventures. Niall wanted to go along to the boathouse, but Alison shook her head. "That boathouse gives me the creeps even now."

"Don't see why it should. The secret passage is all closed up and the old ladies are living there again."

"Yes, I know. But I'd rather sit here and watch the waves." Then, changing the subject quickly, for even on a sunshiny day like this she did not like to talk about the grim old house with its ghostly reputation, she said: "Let's have a look at the map and find out exactly where Achnamara is."

Niall spread it across their knees and took out a pencil. "See, there's where you turn off from Ashnish. Second-class road, it says. You cut across the moor, and keep inland for quite a bit, then the road joins the shore again just before you get to Achnamara. There's the loch—it's on this side of the house."

"It looks a good long way."

"Four or five miles, I should think, though it's probably a foul road. We'll not bother about it to-day."

He stood up and Alison noticed how he gazed longingly in the direction of the boathouse, and she was determined that whether it was closed up or not she would not go near that secret cave again, so she said hastily, pointing above her head to where a bird was circling round and round: "Listen to that curlew, Niall." Niall made no reply. "Perhaps its nest is somewhere near." Still he said nothing. "Funny how its bill turns in at the end—it's so long too."

At last he turned. "Nature talk by Alison Campbell!" And they began wheeling their cycles up the long slope that eventually led them to the hill road.

"Niall—don't look just now, but the colonel's coming down from the Clarig moor."

He waited discreetly for a moment, then exclaimed: "So it is. Yellow kilt and all. Looks as if he's in a hurry too, leaping along like that. You'd almost think he didn't want to meet us."

He was crossing the moor at right angles from the road, which he reached while they were still about two hundred yards down the hill. He waved to them but did not stop, and went on at the same brisk pace along a narrow track to the left. By the time they had reached the top of the short steep brae he was out of sight.

"He may be in a hurry," said Niall, "but I don't call that very matey. He might at least have waited and said good morning. And dash it all, he did ask us along. It would have been polite to say he was sorry he hadn't been able to fix a day."

"Wonder what he's been doing out on the moor?"

"Paying a visit to Clarig House perhaps. That's the short cut home, and if he didn't want anybody to see him it's the best way."

He giggled. "You can't suspect somebody simply because they hurry home across a moor." The road here was very steep, so they rested their cycles against a stone dyke and perched themselves on the top. Another cyclist approached, also wheeling his bike. It was Donald, one of the Clarig keepers.

"Well now, if and it isn't the Campbells!" he said, leaning over his saddle. "I was after thinking you might be out on the river this morning, seeing the gentlemen have left the big house. It is a fine breeze too, just right for the fishing."

"We can't go on the Clarig unless we're asked," said Niall.

Donald pushed back his cap and scratched his head. "So that is the way of it, is it?"

"The colonel has asked us to fish Achnamara loch one day," said Alison.

"Ach, it's the fine gentleman he is. I am just after speaking to him. He called to me across the fields. Very friendly like he is. It is my cousin Chrissie and her husband who are looking after the colonel and his lady."

"Is she still ill?" asked Niall.

"She is that, and it is the colonel himself that looks after her entirely. Even carries her trays through to the bedroom." Donald wagged his head. "And him such a grand gentleman too, even though he does not fish. Aye, aye, and a river and a loch of his own."

"You'd wonder how he puts in his time."

"He's very fond of walking. Hardly a day, Chrissie tells me, but he is away for hours on the moor—tramping miles over the heather. Well now, I must be going. Good-bye to you both and I'll look out for you on the river one of these days."

Niall gazed after him thoughtfully. "Tramping across the moors—kind to his wife—liked by his servants—what could be more innocent than that? I'd feel a lot more hopeful that he was the man we were after if he weren't so blinking popular. Everybody seems to like him, even Donald, and he's pretty sensible." He smiled and quoted, "Even 'the ladies call him sweet'."

"Meaning Shona?" queried Alison, and when he nodded: "Well, I don't. I suppose he must be nice, but somehow I just don't like him."

CHAPTER VII

Mystery in the Library

Alison was on her way to have tea with Shona, and as she wheeled her cycle through the Lodge gates, Polly, one of the housemaids at Clarig House, came round the bend of the avenue.

"I was hoping I would meet you, Miss Alison, because Miss Shona went out with the laird and her mother after lunch and she is not back yet. But she is expecting you to tea and she can't be very long. So will you just go into the library; the french window is open and that will save you going round by the front door." She smiled pleasantly, and added, knowing how keen Alison was on reading: "There will be plenty there to keep you amused."

"Thank you, Polly, that's fine." She mounted her cycle and rode down the avenue that was so thick that even in the depths of winter, when many of the trees were bare, it was dark and mysterious. Her tyres made a soft swishing sound over the fir needles and dead leaves that no amount of sweeping could ever clear quite away. Behind the trees grew thick banks of rhododendrons, and, save for the occasional chirp of a bird, it was very silent and just a little bit eerie. She was glad when the avenue opened out and she came within sight of the house.

Leaving her cycle against the gable, she went round by the flagged path to the french window that opened out to a wide lawn, and glanced inside. The room was empty.

If there was one thing that Alison envied Shona, apart from her horses, it was living in a house that had a library like this. There were heaps of books in the Cottage. They constantly overflowed on to tables and chairs and even spilled on to the floor of the lounge. They were numerous enough, yet somehow Alison never had quite enough to read. So many of the books were deep-looking tomes belonging to her uncle, engineering manuals of Hamish's, or medical textbooks used by Mary at the University, and the rest were nearly all classics that Alison knew she ought to like but did not, and some volumes of poems that she found equally dull. There were of course remnants of childhood days, and books belonging to herself and Niall, but she had read most of them, not once but many times.

How different was this library! Books lined every wall, and although there were many boring-looking volumes, " with no conversation and no pictures " as Shona would have said, there was an entire division in one wall, which meant about six shelves, that had been fitted up specially for Shona by her uncle. It was filled with the kind of books any girl would love to read. Nice bright modern stuff with gay covers outside and jolly illustrations inside. And as if this weren't enough, there were young people's magazines in a pile by themselves.

Alison glanced round her contentedly and hoped Shona would not hurry home! She moved from one shelf to the other, opening a book here and there. It was as good as sampling different sweets, she thought, as she noticed Shona's box of chocolates on the bottom shelf, and she smiled, remembering Shona's fondness for marzipans. At last she chose a book which she hoped Shona would lend her, and then picking up a magazine, she tucked herself up in one of the deep armchairs beside the french window and prepared to enjoy herself.

It was perfectly still in here except for the subdued tick of the French gilt clock on the mantelpiece. Outside, however, there was a slight breeze rustling the trees and causing the window to sway a little. Almost without knowing it she had been aware of the occasional creak of its hinges. It interfered with her pleasure in reading, and yet she could not be bothered moving to close it. But the wind increased and the creak, creak, got worse, and she was just about to get up when, as she turned a page of her magazine, a reflection in the glass window caught her eye.

In the small gallery that ran round the room, forming a sort of second storey, she could distinguish in the glass the slight movement of a man, behind her at the far end of the gallery. He was looking towards her. A spasm of fear ran down her arms to her fingertips. He looked real enough, but how could he be? *For there was no entrance to the gallery that way.* The only door to the library except for the french window was the one that communicated directly with the hall. From the library itself a flight of steps led up to the gallery that encircled the high ceilinged room, but there was no exit from the gallery—no door, nothing but books all the way round.

She sat completely still. She was panic-stricken. Often and often when out with Niall on his mad ploys she had been scared, but having him beside her made a difference. Literally she could not move and she hardly dared breathe. Her thoughts ran through her mind in a confused jumble. Could it be a ghost? If it wasn't, what could it be? If only Niall were here! If she had had the courage she would have dashed outside, but she felt glued to her chair.

And yet, although she was utterly terrified, she kept the magazine in her hand, and at the same time she did not remove her eyes from the frightsome figure reflected in the glass. She could not see his face, just the top part of his body. There was no noise. Not a whisper of sound. And somehow that made it all the worse.

And then—her book fell to the floor with a slithering noise, still open at the article she had been reading, " How to Improve your Tennis Style ". Automatically she lowered her eyes and stooped to pick up the magazine. When she sat up again in her chair there was nothing to be seen. Nothing. Nobody. She was intensely relieved, and yet disappointed that she could find no explanation for what she had seen. Had she really seen someone or could she have imagined it? Cautiously she turned round and looked at the gallery. It was empty. Somebody *had* been there; but figures don't suddenly appear walking through bookshelves and then disappear as suddenly as they came—not real live figures.

Her legs felt all wobbly and her tummy was going round in circles. She longed to escape from the library but she was terrified to move, then she caught sight of the bell by the fireplace and wondered if she should ring it. A servant was sure to come and she could ask if Shona would be long, she could ask anything—it wouldn't matter what, so long as there was someone to say it to. Yes, she would ring the bell. But with her fingers actually on it she drew back. What would Niall do if he were here in her place? Certainly not meekly press the bell and wait for a servant to come—certainly not that. He would be too anxious to do a little investigating on his own. More than that, he would have a few things to say to her if she admitted that she hadn't so much as climbed the gallery to that far corner, to search for a possible entrance.

For a few minutes she stood there, motionless, gazing up at the rows of bookshelves, then slowly she walked towards the small flight of steps leading to the gallery. She longed to give a good hard cough, so that if anybody still lingered there they might hear her and be warned to keep out of sight, but her throat was dry with no sound left in it, so placing her hot hands on the cool wrought-iron supports she slowly mounted the stairs. And more slowly still she walked to the far corner.

She knew that at this end were rows of Dickens and Scott bound in vellum. They had the smell of books not read very often. Her hand was shaking as with a terrific effort she leaned forward and pulled out *Oliver Twist*, then *Ivanhoe*. The back of the shelf appeared perfectly normal when she ran her hand along. She imagined that Niall would search for a secret knob or handle, but though she pushed and pressed there was no sign of anything unusual. She tried some of the other shelves, but they too appeared to be just what they seemed—ordinary bookshelves.

As she was turning away she noticed something bright on the floor. It was a kilt safety-pin. Her first impulse was to stoop and pick it up, then realizing that this was certain proof that someone *had* been there, fear gripped her again and, leaving it where it lay, she ran quickly down the stair again. She must get away from the library—and out of the house. But at that moment she heard sounds in the hall and almost simultaneously Shona came bounding in. She was still in her riding breeches, with which she wore a polo-necked yellow jersey.

She shook back her curls and slumped down on a deep easy chair. " Hello, so sorry I was out when you arrived, but Uncle wanted me to go with him and Mummie to Chiarmhor to see some game dogs he'd heard about."

" Is Sir Angus back?" She would feel safer if she knew he was in the house.

" No, they've gone to have tea at the Home Farm, so we'll have ours by ourselves, which is much nicer. You can't talk properly with grown-ups hanging about hearing every word you say. They're what I call a drag on the conversation." The door opened and a maid wheeled in a trolley. " Oh—tea, thank goodness. I bet you're starving."

" Not so starving as usual," said Alison, who for once had no desire at all to eat. But it was difficult to believe in an apparition with Shona sitting opposite her laughing, and her conversation was so natural and amusing that gradually she felt more normal again—and you had to have a very poor appetite to resist the Clarig House cakes.

They had nearly finished when Niall, grinning, appeared at the french window.

" Hello," said Shona, " trust you to arrive at tea-time."

He dumped down his clubs. " I only called to take Alison home."

" Sez you," said Shona, putting half of a large slice of cake in her mouth at once. " Alison, pour out some tea for him."

" These look super sandwiches."

" Cook made them specially."

He lifted a corner of bread and peered inside. " Ha! Fine! Plain common or garden lettuce——"

Shona reacted as he expected. " It's not plain, common——"

" I expect you had it flown from Paris, but it's lettuce just the same——"

" They're specially forced on. We always have them sooner than anyone else."

She spoke indignantly, and Niall caught a warning glance from Alison, who felt that he was being just a little too rude this time. " Sorry, Shona," he said, smiling broadly. " I know you do. They're dashed good—you always have the most exciting ' eats '."

" Then don't be narky—I expect you were beaten at golf."

" Wrong, then. Mr. Murchison and I beat Uncle and Hamish by two and one."

" Were you playing with Mr. Murchison? How deadly."

" We like him and he's nice to play with," put in Alison loyally.

" Oh yes, he's all right—but not to *golf* with."

He pulled a ball from his pocket. " I found this at the third—among the rough."

" That patch near the burn? Then it's mine. I lost a ball there the other day."

" Finding's keeping, though," he retorted aggravatingly.

" It's keeping what isn't yours, though."

" Don't be silly, Shona!"

" You really ought to give it back to me—especially after the box you got from——"

He threw back his head and yelled with laughter. " Must we give you every one we find till the dozen balls you gave us is used up?"

She looked a little ashamed. " 'Course not. But that one is definitely mine."

" Definitely *was*, you mean. Okay. You win. I give it to you as a quid pro quo for the smashing tea."

" As a quid what?"

" Oh, Shona! Don't you learn Latin at your English school? You know even less than Alison. Well—here you are—catch! I know if I don't hand it over you'll tell me I mustn't have any more cake. Now are we square? Though I warn you that next time I find a ball I'm sticking to it even if it's plastered with the Clarig House crest."

" I don't want the beastly ball," said Shona, rolling it back along the carpet.

" Take it anyway," said Alison, and, deciding that it was time somebody changed the subject: " D'you mind if I borrow this book? It looks rather good."

" Take it if you like. I haven't read it," Shona said carelessly.

" You don't seem so keen on fishing, these hols," said Niall.

" I'm going on the river to-morrow with Sallie Macleod. She's coming to spend the day."

Polite murmurs from the Campbells as they waited for the invitation that did not come; then Alison said: " I thought you were *golfing* with Sallie."

" I was, but I changed my mind. What are you two doing?"

" To-morrow?" said Niall. " We're thinking of going fishing too."

" Oh—where?"

" Not quite sure yet. The Hill Loch perhaps."

" Wait till the day after to-morrow and I'll come with you," said Shona, but Niall smiled and said nothing.

As they walked home Niall said: " I wonder if we had a decent river of our own and Shona hadn't, if we'd ask her to come and fish with us?"

Alison laughed. " Of course we would. Even if we didn't want to, Uncle would make us. Listen, Niall——" She was about to tell him of what had happened in the library, but as she hesitated as to how she should begin, he interrupted her.

" When we were golfing I was talking to Mr. Murchison about the church being used by the smugglers, and he said that if you and I liked to go along one day he'd show us the cache where they hid the stuff."

" Did you tell him about our seeing the colonel?"

He nodded. " I didn't mean to exactly. But he's such a decent sort—the way he sticks up for us when Uncle keeps us in our place—that I thought I might as well. But I asked him if he'd mind not mentioning it to Uncle."

" Did he think it was a bit fishy?"

" Well—I thought he would, of course, but not a bit of it. Seemed quite sorry he hadn't been there to show the smugglers' den to the colonel. Said it was kept locked. To hear him speak you'd think the colonel was one of his best pals—just like Uncle. They all belong to the L. G. U."

" What's that?"

" League of the Grown-Ups," he said, grinning.

"Doesn't look as if he minds the colonel poking around, then."

"That's what puzzles me, because I'm sure the colonel is interested in the smugglers' den. If he hadn't been, he wouldn't have gone to the church the day he knew he was pretty safe not to be seen. And when you think of it, the other members of the gang who have been up here never went near the church—it's about the only place they left alone. They tried umpteen caves and the Cottage and Ashnish Lodge."

"It is funny. Listen, Niall. An awfully funny thing happened this afternoon. I've been dying to talk to you about it."

"Funny 'curious' or funny 'ha-ha'?"

"Not funny ha-ha! I was terrified. It was when I was in the library waiting for Shona. She wasn't in when I arrived and Polly told me to wait for her. I was reading and"—she gulped—"a man came out from behind the bookshelves up in the gallery."

"What man? Had he been hiding?"

"I don't know. I didn't see him properly. I saw his reflection in the french window. It acted as a kind of mirror, but it kept moving with the wind and I could only see a bit of him."

He raised his eyebrows. "If he was in the gallery he must either have been there when you went into the library, or else he must have passed you while you were reading."

"Oh no, Niall. I know he wasn't there when I went in, because I was up in the gallery myself to look for a book, and I was sitting on that chair near the bottom of the steps and he couldn't have gone up without my seeing him."

He looked a little sceptical. "Are you sure about that? You know how you go off on a journey once you've dug yourself into a book and never hear anyone who talks to you."

"Yes, but I wasn't reading like that to-day. It was just a magazine. I was reading about how to improve your tennis swing and I couldn't have helped seeing anybody who came into the room."

"You didn't say anything about it to Shona, did you?"

"Oh, goodness, no!"

"And you couldn't make out who it was?"

"I could just make out that it was a man."

"Did you see him disappear, then?"

"No. You see, I dropped my magazine, and after I picked it up I looked and he had gone."

"You're sure he didn't come down from the gallery."

"Niall—how could he? I was sitting there all the time."

"Then," he said, with some satisfaction, "there must be some way of getting out of the library by way of the bookcase. Looks as if there must be a set of dummy shelves." He grinned at her. "Unless it was a ghost you saw."

"If it was a ghost, he left a kilt-pin behind. It was on the floor and I just left it there. Do you think I ought to have taken it?"

Niall considered that. "No, I think you were quite right not to touch it. Suppose the mysterious visitor was the colonel and the pin is his, I should say he's very likely to make some inquiries about it."

"Could it be the colonel, do you think? I mean, why should he be nosing around Clarig House?"

"Why shouldn't he? It's a very old place and you and I know that there is at least one secret entrance from the grounds. Now it seems as if there's a hidey-hole off the library, only I don't know how we're going to do anything about investigating the house without Sir Angus or Shona discovering us." He sighed. "It's an awfully queer business this. All the things we've found out so far are small things of no importance."

"I didn't feel like that when I saw that reflection in the window."

"No, but nothing very definite has actually happened so far. By the way, did you find out who moved the furniture at Clarig?"

"Oh, Shona was a bit vague. She said it must have been Polly. It couldn't have been anybody else."

"Unless someone who doesn't belong to the household is taking a sudden interest in the place. By the way—about that kilt-pin. If it was dropped while you were there, why didn't you hear it fall—it's a polished floor right round the gallery?"

"Not at the far end, Niall. There's a strip of matting, so of course it wouldn't make a noise."

When they got home Hamish was busy in the garden working with a trowel and a dibble in the border beside the french window. "What an age you kids have been!" he said, straightening himself.

"Kids?" echoed Alison reproachfully.

"'Your children were vexation to your youth,
But mine shall be a comfort to your age,'"

quoted Niall.

Hamish laughed. "I'd rather *you* were a comfort now. You've arrived at the right moment. You can help me to put in these plants."

"Could you trust *children* to put in plants?" asked Alison gravely.

" I'll risk it. That lot there are marigolds and these are antirrhinums."

" Gardening's rotten," grumbled Niall, as he picked up the trowel. " And the place is full of flowers anyway. We don't want any more."

" Mary does apparently. Alison, make the holes ready with the dibble—not too close to each other. Then fill up each one with water and put in the plant and pat it tightly——"

" I know, I've done it before," she said rather impatiently.

" First lessons in gardening," said Niall. " Where did the plants come from—Mr. Murchison?"

" Not this time," Hamish said shortly. " The colonel brought them along this afternoon. Very decent of him—he says there are thousands of seedlings at Achnamara."

" When did he come?" asked Alison, her eyes on the border.

" This afternoon. He's not been gone so very long. We met him as we were coming from golf—it's a wonder you didn't see him on the hill road."

Alison and Niall were suddenly absorbed in their work. They were thinking much the same thoughts—that if the colonel had motored over from Achnamara to the Cottage he could hardly have been hiding behind the shelves of Clarig House library.

" By the way," Hamish went on, " he left an invitation for you two to go and fish his loch to-morrow."

" Oh, goody! Just Niall and me?"

" Uncle was telling him you'd had less fishing these holidays than usual, and the colonel said that but for his wife being ill he'd have fixed something earlier."

" Is she better, then?" asked Niall.

" I believe so. The colonel is taking her to see a doctor in Inverness to-morrow, so neither of them will be at home, and he is giving Chrissie and her husband the day off and the house will be shut, but he said if you liked to take sandwiches and spend the day on the loch——"

" I hope Uncle said ' Yes ' for us," Niall said eagerly.

It was now Hamish's turn to keep his head closely bent over the bed where he was working. " To be quite candid, Uncle didn't exactly leap at the invitation."

" Why ever not?" asked Niall indignantly.

" He thinks it's rather far to cycle there and back and put in a day's fishing as well." He grinned at his young brother and sister. " But all is well. I said to Uncle that if you went there on your bikes I'd go along in the afternoon and collect you in the car."

" Thanks a lot, Hamish," said Alison.

" ' This was the noblest Roman of them all '," began Niall, then stopped abruptly. " Dash! I can't remember what comes after that."

" Thank goodness! We've had quite enough quotations for one afternoon," remarked Hamish.

" What's wrong with this family is that they don't appreciate good things when they hear them."

" Talking of good things, did Mr. Murchison tell you he'd a gift from the colonel? Ten pounds to spend on prizes for the Sunday school."

" Ten pounds!" exclaimed Niall, grinning ruefully. " Gosh! You could get a new bike for that!"

" I shouldn't have thought he'd be interested in the Sunday school," said Alison.

" He has a variety of interests, I gather."

Hamish moved off down the garden carrying his plants, and Niall said softly: " Timeo Danaos dona ferentes."

Alison patted in the last of the marigolds. " Oh, Niall, for goodness' sake! If you must quote stick to English. What does it mean anyway?"

He chuckled. " Broadly speaking, that there are some people you shouldn't trust when they come bringing you presents."

She raised her eyebrows. " Meaning the colonel?" she said.

He nodded. " Meaning the colonel," he said slowly.

CHAPTER VIII

Alison stumbles on a Secret

It was a glorious morning and the Campbells were about to set off for Achnamara Loch. Rain had fallen heavily through the night and raindrops still glistened on the trees and shrubs of the Cottage garden, and the sun that was high over the Clarig hills had not yet robbed the grass of its dewdrops and its greyish silvery sheen. The whole countryside looked startlingly brilliant as if it had been newly painted.

As she waited at the gate for Niall, Alison leaned lazily on the saddle of her cycle and gazed dreamily about her, trying to photograph it all on her mind, though the memory of Clarig on a day like this made her homesick when she was at school. She had so many mental pictures of Clarig that she treasured up and remembered when she was far away from Sutherland. Diving off the rocks with Niall on a broiling summer's day; sledging down the Clarig slopes when the wintry sun made blue shadows on the snow; skating on the Wee Loch; fishing, as often as not in pouring rain, on the Clarig; standing on the rocky heights of the Pudding Bowl on a clear evening and gazing far across the sea to the island of Skye; and a morning like this. If only she had a cine camera as Shona had, and could film it in technicolour!

" Hurry up, Niall," she called, as she saw him cross from the house to the garage, but she did not really mean it. She did not mind if they were a little late in starting off for the loch, for she loved the beginning of a day like this when she and Niall were going off by themselves for the whole day, and had hours of fishing to look forward to.

Even the getting ready was fun. The looking out of the rods—not that that took time, for the Campbells' rods were always in a state of preparedness; the careful selection of flies and casts; the bustle in the kitchen when the lunch was being packed up, and the stowing away of it inside the haversacks; the usual argument with Mary and Kirsty about what they ought to wear; the giving the bicycles the " once-over " to make sure they were all right; and then this exciting moment of anticipation, when all was set and they were waiting to go off—when they were neither quite at home nor actually away.

Niall wheeled his cycle down the path to the gate and Alison smiled to him. At this moment she was breathlessly happy. " Are you ready, then?" he asked.

" Ready? Me? I've been waiting here for you for hours."

" What are you smiling at?"

" Was I? I didn't know."

" ' One may smile and smile and be a villain '," he quoted gaily.

" One may smile and *not* be a villain!" she retorted.

" Still, you must be smiling at something."

" Must I? Well, everything's so utterly perfect this morning. Even the birds. I love hearing them sing like that." High up a lark was singing and she pointed to an oyster-catcher as it flew swiftly over the Cottage, its brilliant coral bill flashing in the sun. From a cottage nearby came the screechy crowing of a cock.

Niall put a hand to his ear. "That's not my taste in bird music!

'The early village cock hath twice done salutation to the morn;
Your friends are up and buckled on their armour.'"

He grinned at her. "In other words, we've buckled on our fishing rods—which are much more important than the birds. Come on. Let's get cracking."

Her front wheel wobbled a little as she balanced her rod. "Gosh, Niall—how you quote!"

"It's a gift," he said, smiling more broadly. "If you like, I can do a nice line about the perfect morning.

'Night's candles are burnt out, and jocund day
Stands tiptoe on the misty mountain tops.'"

"Not any mist as far as I can see."

"That's what you call poetic licence."

They were riding smoothly along the shore road towards Loch Clarig. "I can never remember anything to quote that fits in with what people are saying. Anyhow, we have such tripey stuff for literature. Things like 'quips and cranks and woful smiles'!"

"I should think your English mistress would have a woeful smile if she heard you."

"Well, it's beastly stuff to learn. It begins 'Hence, loathed melancholy', whatever that may mean," she said in a tone of deep disgust. "You couldn't quote *that* now, could you!"

"*You* apparently couldn't, if that's all you remember," he said, chuckling.

"Well, I don't know how you can. Your memory's not so much better than mine for other things, and yet you can spout yards of Shakespeare at any hour of the day or night."

He carefully steered his wheel out of a rut. " I suppose partly it's because—strange as it may appear—I happen to like Shakespeare, and for goodness' sake don't tell Shona that. She'd label me as a complete Sissy. And partly it comes easy to me to learn things off. Old Snotty, our English master, calls it a photographic memory, and if I read a page over very carefully once or twice, I sort of get a picture in my mind of what it looks like."

" And you remember it? Gosh, that sounds to me a bit like cheating! Must come in handy at exams."

" It is. When I happen to have read the right pages."

" I don't think that's fair. Here I go swotting for hours and then usually forget it in the end. There was one thing we had this term that I tried to remember because it reminded me so much of the church here. I expect you know it.

'One last look at the white-walled town,
And the little gray church on the windy shore—' "

" I suppose the church is gray all right, but I shouldn't call Clarig a white-walled town exactly."

" It's how it's perched up above the shore that makes me think of ours. And there's another bit in the poem that fits too. I was thinking about it on Sunday.

'From the church came a murmur of folk at their prayers,
But we stood without in the cold blowing airs.
We climbed—climbed—on the graves—graves——' "

Here she stuck completely, and Niall rather annoyingly finished it for her.

" '. . . on the stones worn with rains,
And we gazed up the aisle through the small leaded panes.' "

" Yes. That's it. Doesn't it remind you of Clarig?"

"Sorry. It does not. Makes me think of a slippery wet merman. I prefer Mr. Shakespeare myself. Come on, cycle a bit faster if you can."

"Well, you needn't push me into the side." She felt he had not been too sympathetic to her recitation efforts—and she had to listen to *him* often enough! They were now approaching the bridge over the Clarig where the river widened out and fell into the waters of the short sea loch. "Oh, there's Shona down there. Let's stop and see if she's caught anything."

They dismounted and he coo-eed till at last Shona heard them and, reeling in her line, walked through the thick grass and looked up at them as they leaned over the stone parapet of the old bridge, covered with moss and yellow lichen.

"Any luck, Shona?"

"Just a tiddler. It must have escaped from the burn. I thought you two were fishing the Hill Loch to-day."

"I told you we hadn't made up our minds," said Niall, adding guilelessly: "Anyway, we're going to Achnamara loch."

Shona did not look too pleased. "But how can you? The colonel's away for the whole day and Mrs. Donald Macdonald is with him."

"Who said we were fishing with the colonel—or with Mrs. Colonel either. We can still fish the loch even if he's gone up in a helicopter."

"So you're poaching, are you? Did you get tired waiting to be asked?"

Niall smiled at her very pleasantly. "I'd poach any old loch if it weren't for Uncle, but we're not poaching to-day. The colonel called at the Cottage yesterday and invited us."

"Oh, did he?" she said in a cool, aloof little voice.

" That's very funny, when the idea before was that you would come with me when I was going to Achnamara."

" We thought it was funny too, Shona," said Alison, feeling that there was some excuse for Shona's annoyance. After all, the colonel was her friend, not theirs. " But I expect he knew you had made some other arrangements and that there was no use asking you."

" I suppose that must be it," she said, slightly mollified, but her head still held high. " And my being here will leave all the more fish in the loch for you."

" Truly a kind thought," said Niall, his eyes glinting impishly as he added: " ' Ill blows the wind that profiteth nobody '."

But Shona was not amused. " Huh!" she said disdainfully. " Trying to be clever as usual."

" Where's Sallie?" asked Alison hurriedly, trying to prevent a further scrap between Niall and Shona. " I don't see her anywhere."

" Just round the next bend," indicating with her hand the most thickly wooded part of the river.

Niall shook his head. " So that's how you treat your guests? I bet she's well and truly hooked by now."

" Well, supposing she is? We're taking the different beats in turn," she said haughtily. " Anyway, if I don't know how to treat my guests, you don't know how to treat your hostess." She switched her gaze sharply from Niall and fixed it indignantly on Alison.

" What do you mean, Shona?" asked Alison, half laughing. Long ago she and Niall had decided that that was the only way to treat Shona when, as so often happened, she was peeved with something they had done to offend her.

" I just mean that if *I* were left alone in *your* house, I'd never dream of helping myself to your chocolates."

"Your chocolates!" exclaimed Alison incredulously. "I never touched your chocolates."

"No use saying that," Shona insisted coldly. "You must have. They were lying on the shelf you took those books from, the ones you borrowed. The box was almost full yesterday when I looked at it in the morning, and then after you'd gone I went to have a chocolate and it was nearly empty."

Normally Alison was placid enough and it took a good deal to make her angry, but one thing that never failed to rouse her was to have her word doubted. Niall, glancing at her face, saw that from flaming crimson it had gone dead white.

"I saw your box of sweets all right," she said very quietly. "And I looked inside too. But I didn't take any——"

"Alison would never touch your sweets, Shona—you must know that," said Niall.

"Well, I don't understand it." Both the Campbells were silent and she went on: "If you give me your word of honour that you didn't——"

"I've already told you that I didn't," Alison said proudly.

"Cross your heart."

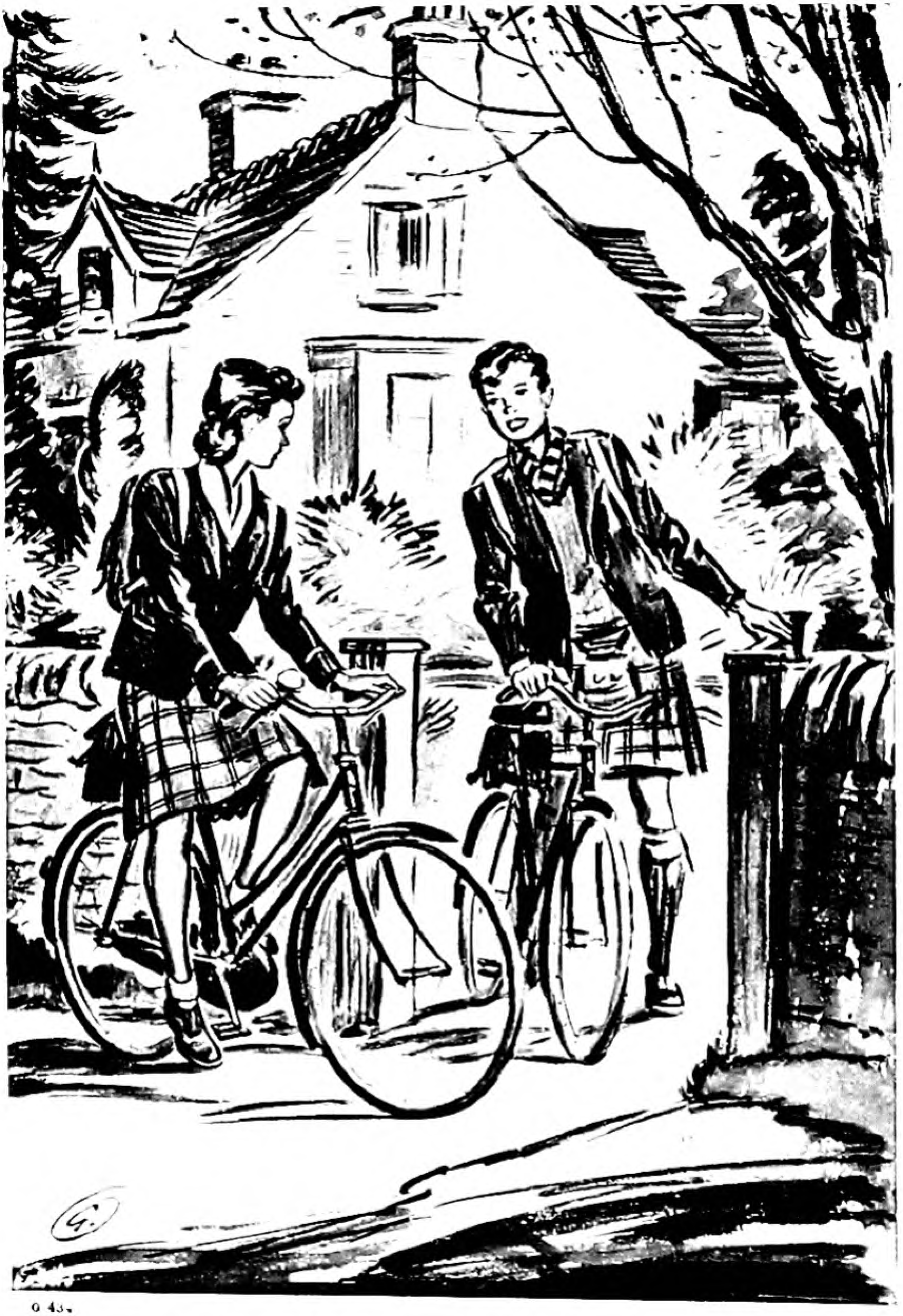
"No, I won't cross my heart. Silly thing to say that, anyhow. I have said that I didn't eat any of your chocolates, and if you don't like to believe me you can do the other thing."

"Hoity toity up in the air! What a fuss about nothing."

"If it's a fuss, it was you who began it."

"Better do the worm act, Shona," said Niall. "Crawl along and say you're sorry."

"Say I'm sorry? What for, I'd like to know. It



G 435

" I'VE BEEN WAITING HERE FOR YOU FOR HOURS "

Page 123

wasn't I who took the chocolates," she replied, tossing her head.

"Okay," said Niall, making a face directed at no one in particular. Then he turned to Shona. "You know there's a line in Hamlet that just fits you!"

"Indeed? I'm not interested in Hamlet, thank you."

Alison had already remounted her cycle and Niall turned with one foot on the pedal: "You're very refreshing when you're angry, Shona."

She looked as if she might have said something, but before she could think of some mild remark that would pass for an apology they had crossed the bridge, and she felt that there was something not quite dignified in shouting out that you were sorry. Besides, she was not certain that she *was* sorry, and as she walked back up the river again, somewhat disconsolately, she muttered: "Pigs!"

But it would have amused Niall could he have known that when she reached the spot where Sallie was fishing, Sallie had indeed caught her hook in the high branches of an oak tree, and after Shona had freed it for her, she sent Sallie down to the treeless pool where she had been fishing when the Campbells came along, and herself took one of the more difficult stretches.

Meanwhile the Campbells rode along the rutty track —Alison with a set face and Niall chuckling every few yards. "I'm glad you're so amused," she said at last.

"It's more than Shona is at all events. Gosh, Alis, it's a long time since I've seen you lose your rag like that!"

She looked at him indignantly. "I didn't lose my rag. Shona had no business to talk to me like that—

refusing to believe what I said. I'm perfectly furious with her."

"I don't find that at all hard to believe." He chuckled again. "You are righteously indignant as Uncle would say.

'Touch me with noble anger!
And let not women's weapon, water drops,
Stain my man's cheeks.'

Well, I've no doubt it will do Shona no end of good to know what you think of her. Or will it, I wonder. It's very annoying, but so often it's the person who is furious who comes off second best."

"I don't care whether I come off second best or not. Shona ought to know me well enough by now to realize that what I say is true."

"She is a little blighter. She ought to be shaken for sending Sallie to fish among the trees while she bags one of the best pools for herself."

"She ought to be shaken for fishing at all this morning," she said heatedly. "Sallie wanted to golf. She doesn't like fishing."

"Poor Shona!"

"Poor Shona, indeed. I'd say 'Poor Sallie!'"

"I was only going to say 'poor Shona' because most people feel she wants a good shaking." He was silent for a minute, then he said: "I wonder who did eat her mouldy sweets."

"One of the maids, perhaps. Must be a bit difficult to see them lying around and not eat them."

"I don't think Shona thinks so—not from the way she said it couldn't have been anybody else."

She turned to him so sharply that she almost overbalanced. "Niall, do you think it could possibly have been——"

"Your mysterious friend from behind the bookshelves? Search me. If he did take them he must have been in the room earlier on or else he came back after we'd all left the library. Still, I don't think it's likely. You'd think he'd be after something more important than pinching a few chocolates."

"It might have been one of Sir Angus's guests—I mean, if the box was lying out."

"Let's forget Shona and enjoy ourselves, and get a move on, Alis. We've still a long way to go."

It was farther to the loch than they had calculated, and as the road was hilly they had to walk a good bit of it. They were both very hot and a little out of breath by the time they had laboriously climbed the last stretch of the curly Achnamara road and at last caught sight of the waters of the loch dancing in the sunshine.

"Cheers, it's downhill from here," said Niall. "We should be there in about five minutes."

"And look down there among the trees—these must be the chimneys of Achnamara House."

He did not even turn his head towards where she pointed. With the loch at hand he had no interest in anything except fishing. "I think if we go through this gate here we'll get down to the loch at this end."

It was then that it happened. They were both looking at the wide five-barred gate and considering how far it was to the loch. Neither of them was riding carefully and their front wheels wobbled a little so that they threatened to interlock. Niall noticed that his rod was pointing too far down, and in trying to keep his balance and prevent his cycle overturning, he swerved so violently that his rod was caught in the spokes of his front wheel. It snapped. The broken point fell to the road and he was left clutching the remainder in his hand.

The next moment their cycles were lying on the road and Alison and Niall were bending unhappily over the two pieces of the rod. It was nobody's fault, just an accident that might have happened to anyone, but that did not make it any easier to bear. Niall was so upset that he had nothing to say except: " Oh, my rod! My rod! Oh, gosh—why didn't I watch!" He straightened up and looked at Alison. " This spoils everything."

" It's dreadful, Niall. Such bad luck! Could you have it repaired, d'you think?"

" I suppose I'll have to. Can't expect Uncle to trot out another rod so soon. Only they're never the same after they've been mended. Golly, I could kick myself. Coming all these miles and then breaking my rod before I even started to fish!"

Poor Niall! Alison was very sorry for him. He had been so proud of this rod that he'd got only at Christmas and had taken such care of. And now this silly accident to happen!

" Listen, Niall. I know of course that it's not such a good rod as yours, but you can have mine—I don't mean just for to-day, but for keeps. You're a better fisher than I am and once yours is mended it'll do me beautifully."

He was so touched by this generous offer that he said gruffly: " Don't be daft, Alis—as if I would take your rod." Then he added more gruffly still: " But thanks a lot just the same."

In a heavy silence they made their way across the field down to the loch. Really, thought Alison, it was awful when you thought you were going to have a perfectly marvellous time and it didn't turn out that way at all. First the row with Shona, and now this. And after Niall had helped her to put up her rod and given her two of his best flies, all the kick had gone out of the day. Diligently she began casting, but there was no fun fishing by yourself—not when the other person had smashed his rod and was completely browned-off.

After an hour or so she had caught nothing and came back to the bank where he was sitting, disconsolately chewing long grasses and gazing into space. " Let's have our lunch, Niall. I haven't so much as seen a fish."

But the catastrophe had affected their appetites and the meal was quickly over. She handed her rod to her brother. " There you are—your turn, and I hope you have better luck than I had."

" It's going to be a bit dud for you hanging round here doing nothing."

" I don't intend to hang round. Too cold anyhow. I'm going to wander down and have a look at Achnamara House."

He looked at her doubtfully. " Do you think you ought? You know how fussy Uncle is about our doing the correct thing, and it might seem a bit like peeping."

" Oh, but I shan't go so near as that. I'll just walk over to that hillock thing—it's quite a bit away from the house—and have a dekko from there."

" Okay. But don't be too long." He was unwinding the line as he spoke, and she knew that long before she was out of sight he would have forgotten her existence.

It wasn't far to the hillock—or at least it did not appear far from the loch, and if she could have gone directly to it she would have reached it in perhaps ten minutes. But the ground was marshy and she had to make several detours, then the ground dipped and she found herself confronted by a swift-running burn. It was too wide to jump across and there were no stepping-stones, so she decided to follow it up a little way in the hope that it would be more shallow.

But she had to walk farther than she expected before coming to a possible crossing, and though she was now at the foot of the little hill the ground was very rough with long grass and tree trunks, and there was no sign of a path. She had wet her feet too in crossing the burn and she was half inclined to turn back. She was not really interested in Achnamara House, and had only suggested this trek so that Niall could have a spell of fishing without having to bother about her. It was that thought that made her push on. If she went back he would feel he would have to give up the rod to her, and it would be most uncomfortable for her to go on fishing while he mooned about the bank looking bored.

So on she went, through quite a dense thicket of young larches. It was very sheltered here, much warmer than by the lochside, and the sun peeping through the branches laced it in gold. Primroses were out too, and some violets and soft deep moss grew around the bigger trees. Above her a blackie was singing. It was all lovely and she began to be glad she had come.

Quite suddenly she emerged on a clearing and found she had reached the top, and it was only then, as she stood gazing down, that she realized that she had climbed the wrong hill. This one was considerably higher than the other and it was much nearer to Achnamara House—so near that with a decent drive she could have sent a golf ball down into the courtyard that was almost beneath her.

There was nothing very outstanding about the house. It looked like many other shooting lodges scattered about the north of Scotland. A two-storeyed house, whitewashed, with plain small-paned windows outlined in black; a collection of outbuildings including a large kennel; and, a little distance apart, a garage. A fringe of fir trees stood like sentinels at one side, and curving to the back and acting as a screen to the outhouses was a semicircle of laurel hedge. Also in the grounds and hidden from the house, though Alison could see it plainly from this height, was a tiny stone cottage—that must be where the colonel's " couple ", Chrissie and her husband, lived.

Beyond the house she saw the river as it widened out and flowed into the sea. The sun sparkled on it in shimmering beams. It was a perfect situation for a house, the sea, the river and the loch all just at hand. How extraordinary for a man like the colonel to rent a house like this when he did not fish! It would surely have been more natural to take a place near a golf course.

It was completely quiet and deserted. She gazed at the dancing river till there were yellow spots in her eyes. " I bet there are more fish down there than there are on the loch," she said, half aloud. " I wonder why he didn't ask us on the river." Something else flashed in the sun beyond the river. Against a rocky cove she could just distinguish a small yacht cunningly anchored against a background so like its own colouring that, had the sun not glinted on its metal-work, she would never have seen it. She supposed it must belong to the colonel. Funny he had never mentioned it. Or was it funny? Was it not just what you might expect? She wished Niall had been with her. They might have gone down together and explored that half-hidden anchorage. Perhaps they might come back another day—only there would never be another opportunity so good, with everybody away for the whole day.

Should she go down on her own? It shouldn't take so very long, but if she weren't back at the loch reasonably soon Niall might wonder where she'd got to, might come in search of her, and they'd be sure to miss each other.

She decided against it, and, as she stood up to go, a twig snapped sharply under her foot. Simultaneously from the direction of the kennel beneath came the sound of a dog barking. Involuntarily she stopped, thinking that probably the dog was hungry through being left alone so long. It continued to bark on a highly pitched note as if it were startled. Poor thing, she might clamber down and talk to it. She half slithered down the hillside, which on this side inclined to be soggy, but when she reached the bottom she saw to her surprise that, instead of the usual deer fence that surrounded such houses, there was a high stone wall. Unless she followed it to the front of the house she might as well have stayed at the top of the hillock.

The dog was barking as furiously as ever, and seeing a small green gate let into the wall, she was making for it when she heard footsteps crunch on the gravel on the other side of the wall. Her heart pounded. Was the colonel back before his time? Not particularly curious as a rule, she now had an overwhelming desire to discover the maker of these footsteps, and, turning, she climbed back towards the hillock again. The trees here were fairly thick and if she kept well back she was not likely to be seen, and she made little sound on the soft ground.

As she expected, she had an excellent view, but as she balanced herself against a tree trunk she gave a little gasp, for it was a woman who was walking on the other side of the wall. She wore a tartan skirt and a loose tweed coat and a drooping felt hat that hid her face. She had a sort of unwieldy stride, and though she certainly did not look like an invalid, Alison was pretty sure that this must be the colonel's wife. At any rate it wasn't Chrissie, and who else could it be? So she had either come home early from Inverness or else not gone at all.

Alison crouched back into the thicket, for the woman was opening up the kennel and when she returned would be facing in this direction, and if she were to see Alison her being here would be difficult to explain. A chain clanged and the agitated barking ceased. The dog was a huge golden Labrador and the woman held him on a lead, but Alison noticed that he kept straining in the direction of the wall. Instinctively she cowered down so that if Mrs. Macdonald glanced up she would not see her. She could hear the dog panting and giving occasional excited yelps.

Her heart was thumping as she leaned against the tree. If only she hadn't been such a fool as to come down here! And Niall had warned her to keep well away from the house. What *could* she say if she were spotted?

And then she heard a deep-throated voice say firmly: " To heel, Glen! To heel! Come along."

She had a tight choking sensation in her throat, then a moment of nightmarish terror. For this was—she felt sure it was—a man's voice. But being Alison she just had to make certain. Very cautiously she raised her head and almost in the same movement she dropped it again. She had seen the individual clearly. The dress might be a tartan skirt and a droopy hat, but Alison was convinced that the wearer was masculine.

Sheer panic shook her. What dreadful thing had she blundered into? Waiting only till the footsteps had receded along the gravelly path and a door had banged with a loud hollow sound, she scrambled madly, blindly, up the hillside again, dragging herself up by branches of trees, roots, anything that offered any support. Arrived at the clearing from which she had viewed Achnamara, she only paused long enough to get back her breath, and then she was hurrying down the other side, half falling and clutching the tree trunks as she went.

It looked different from this side and she lost her way a little, so that she could not find the exact spot where she had crossed the burn. There was no need to hurry now, she told herself, but she was still so scared that she could not think properly, and she dashed up and down trying to find the crossing.

Then her fear increased. From far behind her she heard a quick excited bark, several times in quick succession. For a second or two she stood still. Somebody had let the dog loose. He was coming after her over the hillock—he would follow her scent. Desperately she plunged into the peat-brown water and it took her well over the ankles. It was icy cold but she did not feel it. Her only thought was to get away—to get back to Niall—to separate herself from the dog.

She tore up the bank. The moisture was squelching in her shoes and the long reedy grasses whipped her bare legs and stung them cruelly. Although she did not realize it she was sobbing, half in pain and half in terror, and still she ran on. Again she was confused and mistook the way, but she was afraid to turn back.

The ground continued to rise, and it was not till she neared the top, still half running and half stumbling, that she dared to look back. One glance was enough. For something was moving swiftly down the hillock by the way she had so lately come, something of a tawny yellow colour that seemed to weave in and out among the deep grass—the waving tail of the Labrador as, with his nose to the ground, he kept on pursuing.

"Niall! Niall!" she yelled wildly. She staggered on, uncertain of her direction. Then in the same moment that she reached the top of the slope she caught sight of the loch in the distance, and there before her, approaching at full speed along the path, was Niall.

CHAPTER IX

Meeting the Colonel's Wife

"Hi—I say, what's all this about!" exclaimed Niall, as Alison simply hurled herself against him. "What's wrong?"

"Oh, Niall—it's the dog—it's after me!" she panted incoherently. "It followed me all the way—they must have let it out——"

"What dog? What *are* you talking about?" He spoke rather guiltily. When he had seen her rush towards him in this palpitating fashion, her cheeks flushed and tear-stained, and this distressed, frightened expression in her eyes, he had felt extremely uncomfortable. He had been so absorbed in his fishing that it was only a few minutes ago that he had realized just how long she had been away. He knew very well that she had made Achnamara the excuse to put in time so that he should not be entirely done out of his day's sport, and should not feel he was using her rod while she had nothing to do. Certainly it had occurred to him some time since that it was time she was back, but there had been a rise on just then and it had seemed a pity to lose the chance of getting a fish.

Poor old Alison—he shouldn't have allowed her to go off on her own. If anyone had gone it should have been himself. He noticed her sopping shoes, shapeless and splashed with mud, and her legs scratched and bleeding.

"You look as if you'd been in the wars," he said, speaking lightly, because he still felt uncomfortable. "Did you fall in the burn?"

"It was when I was coming back. I had to wade through it. You see, I heard the dog barking and it was coming nearer." Her voice ended in a gulp. "Niall—they lose the scent if you've been through water, don't they?"

He wanted to laugh at this ambiguous statement, but he saw that she was genuinely scared and needed assurance, so he gave her elbow a comforting squeeze. "Of course they do. But it might be better if you began at the beginning. Whose dog is it and why should it be chasing you?"

"It's the Achnamara Labrador. It was locked up in the kennel and it must have heard me make a noise when I was up on the mound. You know I climbed the wrong hillock . . ."

In short jerky spurts of sentences she told him all that had happened, and Niall's expression that at first had been faintly amused gradually changed. It became serious and puzzled, and as he listened he sat motionless, gazing at the wind ruffling the water of the loch.

By the time Alison had finished she felt better. She plucked a handful of grasses and began scraping the mud from her brogues. Helped by Niall's quiet matter-of-fact attitude, she no longer had that hunted feeling, and with him beside her she felt subconsciously that nothing so very terrible could happen to her now.

She shivered. "Maybe it doesn't sound awful, Niall, but it was. And there's something evil about that house—I'm sure there is. I feel positive they're mixed up with the gang."

" I wonder," he said slowly. " We must try and work this thing out sensibly. *We* both think the colonel is the man Uncle's after and so we're ready to be suspicious of everything connected with him. But "—he smiled awkwardly—" real detectives sometimes tackle the job from the opposite angle."

" How d'you mean?"

" Well, let's take for granted that we're all wrong about the colonel. Suppose he's perfectly okay—and after all, Uncle says he is—and that he went off this morning to Inverness as planned, but for some reason or other didn't take his wife with him. Got that?"

" Yes, but what about the man being dressed up like a woman?"

" You can't be quite certain about that. Some women have got mannish faces. Anyway, suppose Mrs. Macdonald is at home, reading or something, when the dog begins to bark so much that she decides to bring him inside. But he's a bit of a hunter and though she has him on the chain he's trying all the time to break away and go after rabbits. And after she's taken him to the house he goes on barking, so she lets him out and he makes one bee-line for the hillock where you are. He finds a rabbit trail and goes nosing after it, not knowing there's another scared rabbit, one Alison Campbell, just ahead of him."

" Sounds possible—but what about the yacht?"

" What about the yacht? Why shouldn't he have a yacht?"

" Yes, but why have it tucked away like that nearly out of sight?"

" Because it's the most sheltered spot, I should imagine. Think of the gales along this coast and look how careful Uncle is of our boats."

She was still unconvinced. " But you'd think he'd tell us he had a yacht in Scotland."

" Why should he? We haven't seen so very much of him. And if it comes to that, he may have mentioned it to Shona or Sir Angus, and even Uncle may know though he hasn't said anything about it to us."

" So you think I've been making a fuss about nothing," she said slowly.

" I wonder what Lord Peter Wimsey would do," he said thoughtfully. He began to chew a long grass. " *I* don't think you've been making a song about nothing, only I wish I'd been there when you looked over the wall and saw the dame in the tartan skirt. I can't help feeling, Alis, that's the weak point of the story. If he wasn't a woman, why bother dressing up like one in a place like Achnamara where there was nobody to see him?"

" There was me, as it happened."

" Yes, but you were the thousandth chance. Think carefully. *Could* you have made a mistake? As I said, some women have faces like men and voices too."

" I don't think so, Niall. She walked in a funny sort of way."

He giggled. " That settles it. She must be a man. Oh gosh, if only I'd been there!"

" If only you had."

" It's like a jig-saw puzzle that doesn't fit. After all, Chrissie works there—if there was anything mysterious about the *ménage* she'd be sure to know. And you know what Donald said about them liking the colonel."

She looked a trifle dashed. " Yes, you'd think that if there was anything fishy Chrissie would have spotted it."

He scrambled to his feet. " Look at the time. We've to meet Hamish at the end of the road at the half-hour."

She suddenly grinned. "Imagine my forgetting to ask if you caught anything."

He opened his bass to show her two smallish trout. "That's the lot. I had another one on but he got away and took my fly with him. Not much of a loch this, if you ask me. I'd just as soon have the burn."

Neither of them spoke much as they trudged across the field to the road where they had left their bikes. Alison's thoughts still kept roving round the strange female she had seen, and the loss of his rod was beginning to trouble Niall afresh.

As they cycled round the last bend they saw that the car was already there. "It's Uncle who's there—not Hamish," said Alison.

He sighed. "Oh, well—I'll get it over all the quicker."

As they dismounted, Mr. Campbell got out to help them fix the cycles to the back of the car. "Had a good day?"

"Not very," Alison said, looking at Niall.

"Two fish and one broken rod," he said grimly, holding it out as he spoke.

Mr. Campbell frowned. "How did that come about?"

"It wasn't Niall's fault," Alison said as usual.

"Niall can tell his own story. What happened?" He took the two broken pieces and examined them. Niall tugged at his collar and explained briefly. He felt bad about this accident, for he knew his uncle had gone to a good deal of trouble to find the right kind of rod for him and it had cost a lot of money. It seemed a long time before he handed it back and said: "A pity. It was a nice rod. Afraid you'll have to make do with a mended one for a while."

" Yes, of course, Uncle," he said gratefully, thankful to be let off so lightly. As he said later to Alison: " One decent thing about Uncle is that he doesn't row you when he sees it was really an accident and that you couldn't help it."

" Where is Hamish?" asked Alison, as they got into the car.

Mr. Campbell smiled. " I left him playing a salmon on the river. Quite a big chap. That's why I'm here. What's the Achnamara loch like, by the way?"

" Rotten! Alison didn't even have a rise and my two are quarter pounders."

" I think the river looks better," said Alison, speaking without thinking. " I bet we'd have taken something good out of it."

" The river you're not fishing is always the best," said her uncle with a laugh, as he pressed the self-starter. Then he allowed the hum of the engine to die away again and turned to her sharply: " But how do you know what the river is like? It is a long way from the loch."

She hesitated. " Well, you see, Uncle, as we had only the one rod between us we took it turn about." She waited but he did not help her out. " And—when —one of the times when Niall was fishing I went for a walk—it was too cold just to hang about and there was nothing else to do—so I saw the House——"

" But the entrance to Achnamara is right on the other side—two miles it must be along the road."

" Oh, I didn't go by the road. I went down by the burn and climbed a sort of hill and found I was right at the back of it—it was just below where I was." Mr.

Campbell said nothing and she went on nervously: " I had an awfully good view—the house and the garage and the kennels and the place where the yacht is moored near the mouth of the river——"

" Whose yacht is moored where?"

From the front seat Niall shot an agonized glance at his sister—she had got herself into a jam all right. " I suppose it must be the colonel's yacht, Uncle. I couldn't see it properly—it was in a wee anchorage."

Mr. Campbell said " Oh!" in a very non-committal kind of voice, and in an effort to make everything appear normal Niall said: " We didn't know they had a yacht at Achnamara—did you, Uncle?"

There was the smallest pause before he said: " No, I didn't know, but of course I don't know the colonel well." Then for a minute there was silence. Alison was uneasily aware of the strung-up quality in the air, and she was afraid of what this silence might lead to—afraid it might make their uncle guess the very things they were trying to hide from him—and without actually meaning to she said recklessly: " It was a green yacht. Not all one colour. You know. Sort of camel—camel——"

Niall turned with an exasperated grin. " Camouflaged is what she means!"

" Yes, that's what I was saying." And inwardly she was thinking: " Oh gosh! why did I have to mention the yacht? I shouldn't have said anything about the house either." But in spite of her thoughts she went on: " It was greeny, kind of. The colour of the rocks."

" First time I knew rocks were green," said Niall, and Mr. Campbell said, still in that quiet restrained voice: " Was there anybody aboard her?"

" I couldn't see—I wasn't near enough."

" And you saw no one about the house?"

Now if Niall had been asked this question he would have made one of several evasive answers. He might have said: " Well, I knew everybody was away for the day, even Chrissie and her husband." Or: " It's mostly outhouses at the back, there." Or he might have said innocently: " I saw a dog. A huge brute of a thing. A golden Labrador." Any of which replies, while perfectly true, would have conveyed the impression that no one had been seen around Achnamara that afternoon.

But for Alison a reply of this sort was impossible. " N-no—y-yes—w-well——" she stammered, and Mr. Campbell said coldly: " No—yes—well—is hardly an answer to my question. Which do you mean?"

She fumbled nervously in her mind, and to her own horror and to Niall's also, as she could tell by the sudden stiffening of his back, she heard herself blurt out: " Yes, I—I did see someone, Uncle. Someone came out of the house wearing a tartan skirt."

" She thinks it must have been the colonel's wife," said Niall, trying to stop her, as she realized only too well. " But of course it couldn't have been—they were going to Inverness."

" Perhaps she didn't go," she said feebly.

" You didn't see her very well, I take it?"

" No—not very well," she said hesitatingly, knowing that this was what Niall would want her to say but thinking all the time: " That's not really true. I did see her quite well."

" Some friend of the Macdonalds, I dare say," Mr. Campbell said casually, as if it were something of no consequence, then without saying anything further he started up the engine again. But it was a silent run home.

The sight of Hamish at the back door holding a silvery salmon up by the tail banished, for the time at least, all thoughts of Achnamara and the strange woman.

" Hamish, it's a beauty!" said Alison. " How heavy —twenty pounds, do you think?"

" Nineteen and a half."

" What did you catch him on?" asked Niall.

Hamish laughed. " I got him on my trout rod. I wasn't fishing for salmon at all—hadn't seen a fish all day, and I was just going to pack up when he came to me."

They followed him into the kitchen, where Kirsty produced a large ashet. " A noble fish, as old Sandy would say," said Mary, joining them.

" And a noble river too," said Niall. " Give me the Clarig and all the lochs can go hang."

" Even Achnamara?" asked Hamish.

Niall struck a tragic attitude. " ' If you have tears, prepare to shed them now.' Not for the fish—but for me. I burst my rod, Hamish. Alison will tell you about it." He turned dismally and went upstairs.

At supper the conversation turned, as it so often did, on fishing, and Niall said heavily: " Anyway, the colonel must be a pretty rotten sportsman or he'd never have boosted his silly old loch. The Hill Loch's miles better."

" Never mind," said Mary. " The family is well up on the day's sport, thanks to Hamish. First salmon out of the Clarig this season, isn't it?"

Hamish grinned. " First official one at any rate. I shouldn't like to say how many Colin has poached."

"Can we have it for lunch to-morrow, Mary?" asked Alison.

"I should say so," said Mary, but Mr. Campbell interrupted: "I was going to suggest that it might be nice to send it along to Achnamara. It would be a treat for Mrs. Macdonald when she is not so well."

Niall winked across the table at Alison, who immediately lowered her eyes to her plate. Nobody else spoke, and Mr. Campbell said, a trifle impatiently: "What about it, then? The colonel was very kind bringing along these plants for the garden, and I dare say he would appreciate—however, it's your fish, Hamish. What do you say?"

"Quite an idea, I think, Uncle. Only"—he grinned at Alison and Niall—"I don't imagine the Achnamara people are quite so hungry as—ahem!—the Campbells, and nineteen pounds of fish is a fair amount for two people. Why not cut it in two?"

"And half a salmon is better than no fish," Niall said irrepressibly.

Mr. Campbell agreed with an amiable smile. "You might take it along after supper—I should think the colonel must be home by now. Alison, having viewed the back of Achnamara, it may interest you to see what the front of the house looks like. Though it might be as well not to mention to the Macdonalds that this is your second visit in one day. You'll go too, I suppose, Niall?"

Niall nodded, trying not to appear over keen, but Alison at any rate saw the excitement that flashed in his eyes, and somewhat to her own surprise she also felt a twinge of anticipation. Wild horses would not have dragged her back there alone. But to go with the others might be fun—that kind of fun that is half fear and half pleasure. "Aren't you coming too, Uncle?" she asked.

"No. Mary and I promised to walk up to Clarig House this evening."

As the young Campbells were setting off they met Mr. Murchison, who said he had just dropped in to smoke a pipe with Mr. Campbell.

"He and Mary have just left for Clarig House—they've gone up by the Glen, so there's nobody at home. But hop in and come with us."

"If you don't mind a fishy smell," said Alison, from the back, as the minister jumped in beside Hamish.

As they passed the entrance to Clarig House, Alison said: "I meant to ring up Shona——"

"Whatever for? I thought you didn't mean to speak to her again till she apologized to you."

"I know. I didn't. And of course I *was* furious with her this morning, but I've been thinking about it, and if she was sure there was nobody in the library but me, I suppose it was natural in a way for her to think I might have helped myself to her sweets."

"Meaning that's what Shona would have done herself?"

"Oh, I don't think she would. But I feel rather beastly having said——"

"I should worry. She asked for all she got."

"All the same, I think I'll ring up," she said uneasily.

"'Oh, coward conscience, how dost thou afflict me!'" he quoted, and she retorted quickly: "Oh, quoting brother, how dost thou afflict *me*!"

In contrast to the bright sunshine of the daytime it was now cold and sunless. Such glimpses of the sea as they had showed a wide stretch of pewter-grey ruffled with occasional white, and even the countryside—

fields, trees, hedges—looked drab and colourless. In the clear atmosphere there was that white quality that belongs to the long spring evenings.

Alison suppressed a shiver. She wasn't cold and she wasn't exactly afraid—or was she? Just a little, perhaps. For now that they were within a few miles of Ashnish she was dreading meeting the mannish woman again. "I hope they don't ask me any questions about ever having been at Achnamara before," she said to Niall, as they turned off the Ashnish road and began climbing the narrow track they had ridden earlier in the day.

"Well, you made a bad botch of things with Uncle," he said, with brotherly candour. "Talk about spilling beans! It was like a part you had learned off and you couldn't stop yourself. Why did you?"

She shook her head helplessly. "I don't know. Uncle's got a way of making me tell things. Speaking of the yacht was dreadful of me."

"As it happens, I don't think it matters. Your blurting it out like that looks as if we don't suspect anything, and somehow I don't think he does either."

"Don't you?" she said in surprise. "I was sure he did and that was why he was sending us along here to-night—sending Hamish, at least, to have a dekko. *We* don't count. We're just camelflage——"

"Alison Campbell! Be your age—*camouflage*!"

"Oh, well, it sounds the same anyhow."

He giggled. "If I ever thought of being a teacher—which I don't!—I'd apply for a post in a girls' school. You'd get such a lot of free amusement."

She did not reply, for at this point the road swerved sharply downhill towards the sea and they saw immediately ahead of them the entrance to Achnamara

House. Iron gates of a plain design stood open, and a short drive led up to the wide front of the whitewashed house that Alison knew from a different angle. Hamish collected the salmon and got out, and crossed the sweep of gravel to the front door.

As he put his hand on the old-fashioned iron bell the colonel came through the hall. From the car they could hear his cordial greeting, and Niall winked at Alison as they heard him say: " Well, indeed you are a very kind friend."

Niall giggled and murmured quietly: " 'I would be friends with you and have your love.' "

Mr. Murchison turned smiling from the front seat. " I would be friends with you and have your *fish* would be more to the point. Oh, he's coming over."

The colonel came forward and shook hands first with the minister and then with Alison and Niall. " You must come in—please do, even if it's only for a short time. My wife sees so few visitors and she is up this evening. She insisted on coming through to the lounge when we got Mr. Campbell's message."

" I hope she is none the worse of her trip to Inverness," remarked the minister, as they followed the colonel up the shallow worn steps.

" Oh—didn't you know? She didn't go after all. We decided this morning that it would be unwise for her to attempt such a long run there and back in one day, so instead I rang up the doctor and he said he would send on some medicine. He had it put on the train and I picked it up at the junction."

He was still wearing his yellow kilt and it still looked as bright and as unlike the usual Highland tartans as ever. Very politely he ushered them inside. Alison's first impression was a great expanse of bare floor, for although there was an odd Persian rug scattered here and there in the hall, there didn't seem to be nearly enough for the size of the place. It was sparsely furnished too. A paraffin lamp stood on an old refectory table and on either side of this were two oak chairs cushioned in red. There were some deer heads peering down from the walls and several cases containing stuffed fish, but there was no more furniture. No ornaments, no flowers, nothing homely or friendly or gay.

The lounge was a large room to the left of the hall with four high windows looking seawards, but from here it was not possible to see either the yacht or the river. A peat fire burned on the hearth and Alison sniffed appreciatively the acrid smoky smell. Although it was quite light outside, the ceiling here was low and the curtains heavy, and it was almost dark, or would have been except for the flames that cast grotesque shadows across the room.

The colonel ushered them forward with a flourish. "Well, my dear, here are our visitors. You've heard of Mr. Murchison the minister, and of course the Campbells—Alison and her brothers, Hamish and Niall."

With his hand under her arm, Alison felt herself being gently propelled to the corner on the far side of the fireplace. There on a sofa a handsome grey-haired lady half sat and half lay. She wore a dress of some dark silky material and a tartan rug covered her knees. Smiling kindly, she held out her hand. "My dear, how very nice of you to come and see us. Come and sit here beside me. Was it you who caught the salmon?"

"No, it was my brother, Hamish," she said shyly, turning towards the men, who with Niall had gone to the other end of the room where they were examining some sporting prints hanging on the wall.

"The colonel hears from everybody what fine fishers the Campbells are."

Alison flushed a little. "Oh, not really."

"My husband and I did not take up fishing till it was too late. I am not well enough just now to fish at all, but my poor husband"—she shook her head with an apologetic smile—"he tries and tries but he never catches anything at all."

"That's not much fun."

"Indeed it is not." She reached for a box of sweets that stood on a low table beside her. "Will you have one? Oh, not one—take two or three. I used to be very fond of sweets when I was your age—and still am if I must tell the truth," she added, with a mischievous smile. "Now, where was I? Oh yes—the colonel. No, fishing is not his sport but he is an excellent shot." She nodded emphatically. "Excellent."

"He golfs very well too," Alison said timidly, but the old lady waved that aside so brusquely that Alison was suddenly reminded of the Queen in *Alice in Wonderland*, and would hardly have been surprised if Mrs. Macdonald had muttered: "Off with her head!"

"Golf—oh yes, he golfs"—in the sort of voice she might have used if she had said he played rounders. Then changing the subject abruptly: "Was it you who fished the loch to-day?"

"Yes. Niall and I were along." She shot a glance towards Niall as he stood listening to the colonel discuss the prints. She tried to will him to come over but he did not even look round.

Now from the minute she had entered this house Alison had been prepared to find that the strange woman she had seen in the afternoon and the colonel's wife were the same. But as she shook hands with Mrs. Macdonald she saw that she had been wrong. There was no resemblance between them. This lady's hair was softly waved and arranged around her head in little curls, while the woman in the tartan skirt seemed to wear hers short. Then there were their voices. They weren't alike either. Instead of the gruff deep tones she expected, Mrs. Macdonald spoke in a highly pitched, almost squeaky tone. In the dim light her face was indistinct and she could not make out the features very clearly, but her skin was very pink and white, and for an oldish lady her lips were painted a most startling shade of red. In addition to her wedding ring she wore only one other, with a large diamond that shone in the firelight.

It wasn't the same. It couldn't be. This was an aristocratic gentlewoman, well bred and well dressed; the other looked as if she had dragged on some clothes without once using a mirror. Yes, this was the colonel's wife all right. But who, then, was the other woman? All this was going through Alison's mind as she listened to Mrs. Macdonald talking.

" And did you catch any fish?" she was asking now.

" I didn't. Niall did. You see, he broke his rod, so we had to fish turn about."

" My dear, why didn't you come down here? We took this place furnished and there are positively dozens of rods."

" We never thought of that." She had a sudden inspiration. " There wouldn't have been time, would there? Coming along to-night it seemed a very winding road—is it not about two miles from the loch?"

" Perhaps it is." She took another chocolate and again handed the box to Alison, but she did not mention that it was a very short distance to the loch if you went out by the back and climbed the hill.

" And what else do you do at Clarig besides fish?" she asked pleasantly.

" Well, in the summer we bathe and have picnics and there's a golf course now. We play quite a lot." She paused, but Mrs. Macdonald seemed to be waiting, so she said: " Sometimes we do a bit of climbing too."

She nodded her head and helped herself to another chocolate, but this time she did not offer one to Alison. " How wonderful! The hills here are very high. In England we should call them mountains."

" Then you are English?" Alison said, without quite meaning to.

" And why shouldn't I be?"

Alison felt her face go hot. " I don't know. I didn't mean to be rude. Perhaps it's your Scots name."

" My name is my husband's name," she reminded her. " But go on. I am most interested in what you find to do in this lovely but lonely place."

" I'm afraid that's all, unless you count cycling and boating."

" And when it rains—what then?"

Alison smiled broadly. " I'm afraid we fish whether it's raining or not." She glanced again at Niall, but he still had his back to her. Mrs. Macdonald, however, had not yet finished her questioning. " Do you read at all?"

" Oh yes, quite a lot. We all like reading in our family."

" I shouldn't have thought you'd have time with such a busy life." She passed over the chocolates, but Alison thought it more polite to refuse. She wished Niall would come and help her out. She had never been asked so many questions. Mrs. Macdonald leaned back on her cushions, and now her face was out of the firelight and completely in shadow. "Do you ever read any detective stories?"

Alison shook her head. "No, never." She was about to add that Niall did but decided not to, but Mrs. Macdonald said, as though guessing what was in her mind: "And what of your brother, the young one, what does he read?"

"Niall? Oh, he——" She *almost* said that he adored Lord Peter Wimsey and Poirot and even Sherlock Holmes, when she stopped and changed her sentence: "Oh, Niall is quite a highbrow in a way. He reads all sorts of things, Scott, you know, and Dickens. He likes war tales too and adventure—about men flying—you know."

"Does he indeed?" She could not have sounded more surprised if Alison had said Niall liked to read about crocodiles' feet.

There was a brief pause and Alison felt she must say something. "Do *you* like reading?"

With a wave of her hand her hostess pointed to a pile of books on the table beside her. "It's my chief hobby. Books of travel. I read every one as it is published. I never read anything else."

"How lovely!" said Alison, but she did not look up. She did not want to meet Mrs. Macdonald's eyes, for with her excellent eyesight, even in this feeble light, she could make out the titles of the two books that lay there. Neither of them was a travel book.

All this time, with hardly a pause, her hostess continued to munch sweets. Alison had never met a grown-up who did that before; she had always supposed it was only people of her and Niall's age who were greedy about sweets. Her mind was a jumble of impressions. This curious woman—the half dark room—the constant questioning—the background of the men's conversation, and something else she could not put a name to, a vague, uneasy something that made her wish she was out of here and back home.

Mrs. Macdonald was speaking again. Another question. " And how is your uncle?"

" Very well, thank you," said Alison, wondering what else she could possibly be asked.

" I'm sorry he did not come with you to-night. I have been hoping to meet him, but perhaps he had another engagement?"

" Yes. Sir Angus Forbes had asked Uncle and my sister Mary to go up to Clarig House this evening."

" And do they——" But she did not hear the end of that question, for the door suddenly burst open and a huge Labrador sprang into the room, and in two leaps had jumped right on to the couch. Instinctively Alison sat well back in her chair, but the dog's paws grazed her slightly as he passed. From the other end of the room the colonel called: " Who let him out? You rascal, what are you doing in here?"

But Mrs. Macdonald made a space beside her on the sofa and patted him. " Don't worry, dear. He's all right, just let him stay." She turned to Alison with a smile. " You're not afraid of him, are you, my dear?"

" I love dogs," she said, which was true. But it was a brave remark, for the sight of this one had brought back all the terror she had experienced in the afternoon. But she was aware that her hostess's grey eyes were resting keenly on her, and with an effort she leaned forward and patted the golden coat.

Immediately, without warning, the dog swerved round and put his great paws on her shoulders and rested his weight on her lap. She could not help giving a little frightened gasp, and Mrs. Macdonald said: " Down, at once! Down, boy."

And to show she was not really afraid, Alison said: " Down, Glen."

The dog was well trained. At his mistress's command he slid to the floor and waited obediently for her next order. But Mrs. Macdonald had transferred her attention from her Labrador. She was gazing intently at Alison. " How did you know his name?" she asked, in a tone that was somehow more frightening because it was so quiet.

Alison gulped. Had she not been so terribly afraid she would never have betrayed the fact that she had seen Glen before. Now she was in a panic. There was no knowing what this might lead to. Then like a flash she remembered Niall once saying to her that the more scared you were the less scared you should look, so somehow she smiled and stammered: " Is h-his name G-Glen? I—I——" But here she was stumped. She simply could not think of anything to say. To hide her fear she looked down at the dog, and in that moment came the answer. " I—I thought it must be when it was on his collar." Sheer relief gave her the necessary courage to pat him again. " He is a lovely dog."

She could not tell whether Mrs. Macdonald believed her or not. She certainly could have no proof that she had *not* seen the name on the collar.

She lay back again on her cushions and once more her face was in shadow. " He is a good dog. A very good dog. Perfectly trained. Does *anything* I tell him—is that not so, my dear?" she asked the colonel as, with Mr. Murchison and the boys, he came down the room.

"I suppose Glen would kill anyone who tried to attack you, my dear," he replied, and though he spoke lightly Alison again had a shiver of fear. She stooped and patted the dog again, but she hardly heard the buzz of talk around her. Then Hamish murmured that they must be going, so they grouped round the sofa while Mrs. Macdonald bade them a very gracious good night.

Alison's good night was automatic.

She had made a terrifying discovery, and so while she nodded and smiled and said "thank you" to her hostess for a pleasant evening—and even remembered to add that she hoped she would soon be quite well again—there was one terrifying thought in her mind that crowded out all her normal ideas.

Her hostess said: "Good night, my dear. It has been delightful to meet you. You must be sure to come again and see us before you go back to school—and the other girl I hear so much about—Shona. She must come too." While Mrs. Macdonald said this in her quiet, but highly pitched voice, Alison was contrasting it with the deep commanding tone the woman in the tartan skirt had used to Glen in the courtyard when she said: "Down—to heel!" and with the same deep tone used by Mrs. Macdonald when she spoke to the dog a few minutes ago. And she knew without any fear of contradiction that the gruff-voiced woman who looked so like a man—the mannish-looking female with the peculiar striding walk—and this gentle invalid lady, who didn't look the least bit like each other, were one and the same person.

That was the discovery that so terrified Alison. But there was something else—who exactly was that person? And was she pretending to be somebody that she wasn't?

CHAPTER X

Midnight in the Churchyard

Alison spoke very little on the drive home. She settled well back into her corner trying to sort out the confused medley of thoughts in her mind. It was the old problem of the jig-saw puzzle again. How could that badly-dressed, harsh-looking woman that she had seen in the afternoon be the same person as the quiet colonel's wife with the soft grey hair and gentle, if slightly inquisitive manners, who was both attractive to look at and charming?

And yet Alison was in no doubt at all. They were the same, even if in some unexplainable way they appeared so utterly different. She was dying to talk to Niall about it.

It was not yet dark and the greyness of the earlier evening had given place to an unexpectedly brilliant sunset that trailed through the sky in turquoise and gold and pink. She wondered how a party frock would look in shot silk designed in sunset colours. A bit too startling, perhaps, she thought as the sun became a crimson ball and dipped lower into the sea. Her thoughts went back to Mrs. Macdonald. Something about her teased Alison's memory. She was reminded of someone but she couldn't think who it was. She thought of all her friends at school, the people she knew only slightly, all the guests who had ever visited at the Cottage, and even tried to make a list of the friends of her friends. But still she couldn't think of anybody the least like the colonel's wife.

What a very curious woman she was! All these questions that had seemed at the time so stupid and meaningless—was there after all something behind them? It seemed so pointless to want to know how she and Niall occupied their time unless she had some suspicion that they *had* other interests besides sport and fun.

The golden Labrador was her worst memory—the dreadful brick she had dropped when she had called the dog by his name! She went hot and cold to think of it. And what would have happened if she had not happened to see his name on the collar she dared not contemplate. So intent was she on the tangle of her thoughts that she gave a start when Hamish pulled up at the entrance to Clarig House and said: "I said to Uncle I'd call for him and Mary, so in case we're held up—I don't suppose they'll be ready to come home for ages—perhaps you kids had better hop out and walk home."

"Is that a funny story?" asked Alison, reluctant to get out.

"If it is, 'they have a plentiful lack of wit'," said Niall. "By 'they' I mean you, Hamish, as well as Uncle and Mary."

"Go on, Niall. Beat it and don't argue." And before they quite realized it, the car had turned in at the lodge and there was nothing for Alison and Niall to do but to carry on down the hill road on foot.

"I hate the idea of walking all that way," grumbled Alison.

"Listen," he said, speaking quickly. "Are you on for a spot of fun?"

" I don't know. I think I've had quite enough fun for one day. Besides, I've got something to tell you. I've found out something to-night."

He looked at her sharply. " Gosh! Have you? So have I. Tell me your story first."

So, as they walked, she told him, and when she finished he stood still and stared at her. " Well, Alis, I hate to depress you, but I think you're off the track this time. The colonel's wife struck me as being rather a decent old dame—except that she stuck that box of chocolates bang under my nose and never asked if I'd like one. But I'm sure she's Mrs. Macdonald all right, and I can't see how she fits in to the female you saw this afternoon. She is probably some sort of relation."

Alison felt rather squashed. She had been so positive that the two people were the same. But Niall was far cleverer than she was at this kind of detecting work and so perhaps he was right.

" What did you find out?" she asked in a flat tone, so disappointed with his attitude that she didn't much care what he had discovered. But his first words made her change that opinion.

" I know now for certain that the colonel is mixed up in this crook business," he said quickly. " When we were in the drawing-room and he was yarning away about these duck-shooting prints, he was really talking to Mr. Murchison and Hamish and I was sort of in the background, behind them. I was feeling a bit bored, and then I noticed on the writing-table beside me a yachting magazine with a smashing picture of a yacht, and I was looking at it when I happened to see some words written in pencil actually on the picture. You might have thought it was a signature. It was scribbled very faintly—if I hadn't been staring so hard at the high masts and sails and things I'd never have seen it."

" And what did it say?"

From his pocket he produced a grimy scrap of paper and a pencil and on it he wrote—" Cl Ho or grave ".

" Do you think it's a sort of message?"

He nodded. " From the gang headquarters. They probably realize that if anybody was suspicious at this end their ordinary letters might be stopped, but even if they had opened up that magazine it's very unlikely they'd have spotted these few words. Looks as if we're getting hot, my dear Watson, and it's a pretty clear proof that the colonel is mixed up in it."

" What do you think the message means?"

" Well—I suppose the treasure is either hidden at Clarig House or somewhere in the churchyard, and the colonel is detailed off to find it."

" Niall, that's a thing I cannot understand. You know how super truthful and honest Uncle is. He'd never say to us that he wasn't after the colonel if he was."

" He wouldn't normally, but he's so anxious to scare us off that for once he might stretch a point. And there *is* something fishy about the colonel. There are too many clues that fit each other. And now this about Clarig House and the church—or the churchyard—narrows the whole thing down." He chuckled suddenly. " Another thing I forgot to tell you. He gave Mr. Murchison a slip of paper to hand in to the post office. They're to stick it in the window. He's lost something. Guess what."

" Not—not the kilt-pin?"

" Puzzle's beginning to come out——"

" Niall, don't you think we ought to tell Uncle about this?" She had a worried expression. " Even if he has—well—sort of misled us about the colonel, it would be so awful if the gang were quicker than we are in finding out where the stuff is hidden and managed to get away with the jewels. Uncle would never forgive us if he found out just how much we knew."

Niall smote savagely at an overhanging branch. He had an uncomfortable feeling that she was right, but it was pretty hard to be working on the right lines as an amateur detective and then have to give up just when things were beginning to be really exciting.

" It's not that I mind telling Uncle, if he'd only give us a chance to work along with him. But you know what he'd do. Tell us we'd been clever children but we mustn't do any more because Mr. X was a dangerous criminal, only keep our eyes open and our mouths shut and pass on anything we happened to hear. While he himself would remain shut up like a clam and keep us in the dark till the whole thing was cleared up."

" Yes, but suppose the treasure is found by the gang?"

He went on in a very grown-up voice, just as if she had not spoken. " It's just as if Lord Peter Wimsey was working on a case and had identified the murderer——"

" But there isn't a murderer here," she interrupted.

" Oh, don't be so young, Alison. I'm only trying to say that suppose Lord Peter had spotted the criminal and had worked out how the crime was done, and when he told Scotland Yard they said 'thank you very much', and told him to go and take a holiday."

They were well down the hill road by now when, as they neared the cross-roads, he slowed down a little. " Although I say all this, I feel the same as you do. I know it's more important that the colonel should be caught than that we manage to work it out on our own, and I promise you this. If we don't find we're getting any forrader in a week or so, I don't mind telling Uncle what we know. But in the meantime——"

He turned to her and grinned, and as she met that dark gleam of determination in his eyes her heart sank. How well she knew it—the sure sign that he had concocted some wild plan.

He began to speak very quickly as he always did when he was excited. "We've got these two places to work on. And probably not any too much time to spare. Now my idea is this. We can't do anything at Clarig House to-night——"

"I don't see how we can do anything there at all——"

"Don't interrupt. It'll be an hour or so anyhow before Uncle and the others are home, perhaps longer, so what's to hinder us from going round by the church and having a dekko there ourselves?"

Alison could have given him a good many reasons why they shouldn't. The very thought of exploring a cellar of the church just when it was growing dusk and tombstones all around, sent a shiver twisting down her spine. "It's awfully late. It'll be dark by the time we get there."

"That doesn't matter. I've got my torch."

She cast about in her mind for an excuse. She dreaded these night rambles that Niall revelled in. "Suppose the others come home early and are in before us, and Uncle asks where we've been."

He pulled a face. "I dare say we could think up something."

"You might. I couldn't. Look, Niall. Let's wait till to-morrow. It's a place we can go to just as well during the day."

" That's where you're wrong. Anybody might pop along and ask us what we were up to in the daytime."

There was no use protesting any further for, taking her assent for granted, he had led the way to the left instead of to the right, and instead of going homewards they were now making for the church. " It needn't take us long to look round," Niall said persuasively. " It really is a chance, and think how we'd score over everybody if we happened to find the treasure. And it's an ideal night to choose, with our crowd and Mr. Murchison at Clarig House and the colonel safely tucked up at Achnamara."

That last remark cheered Alison. Compared with some of the other madcap adventures she had taken part in with Niall, this was a very mild affair. Besides, it wasn't like being out in the middle of the night. What they were going to do wouldn't take long—they should be home quite soon. Already most of the houses in the village were closed up for the night and there was nobody about at all. Their footsteps seemed to resound very loudly, and when she spoke to Niall her voice dropped instinctively to a whisper. She felt they ought to walk on tiptoe.

A few minutes' walk brought them within sight of the church. In the half light, silhouetted against a hazy background of sea and sky, it had an eerie look, and though Alison knew it was foolish to be afraid of tombstones, she could not help imagining, as they went through the small gate in the wall and down the path, that some of the old stones leaned to one side in a very human way. She clenched her hands tightly inside her blazer pockets and walked very close to Niall.

A chill breeze was blowing off the sea and it whistled with a threatening sound through the trees. At times like this she disliked the sea and the wind, and she always disliked the dark. The cellars were at the back of the church, where the ground sloped down on the seaward side, and try as she might she could not prevent her teeth from chattering while Niall fumbled with the door.

" It's locked, but I know where the key is kept—it hangs on a hook—yes, here it is."

As he opened the door and shone his torch inside she gave a quick exclamation of disappointment. " A coal cellar—that's all it is, Niall. I thought it was a smugglers' den!"

He grinned and groped with a bolt behind the door. " Half a mo'. Not so fast, my dear Watson. The den's a kind of inner place. Mr. Murchison once showed me a map. There's another knob on the left—see." The door opened easily, and he closed the outer door and again flashed his torch. It was a tiny place, not more than two yards square, and it was entirely empty. The walls had been recently whitewashed, and what had once been a cache for smugglers now oozed cleanliness and a strong smell of disinfectant.

" Huh!" he said, with a disappointed shrug of his shoulders. " I don't know what I thought we'd find, but certainly not a place like this. It positively stinks of respectability and staggering dullness."

" Is that a quotation?" she asked suspiciously.

He did not reply but kept shining his torch up and down the walls of the small apartment. " Stung and bitten this time. Not so much as a crack. Not a cobweb even. If there was ever a hidey-hole here it's been well bricked up before they did the whitewashing."

" Nowhere else we can look?"

" Don't think so."

She smothered a yawn. Now that she saw a chance of going home she could afford to be generous, so she said: " I suppose Lord Peter Wimsey would tap the walls to find out a hollow part."

He grinned. " Hi! You mustn't steal my thunder. I'm supposed to be the detective in the family. But you've hit it. We ought to tap the walls. Only I haven't anything here that would do——"

She was wondering if she dared suggest that they come back to-morrow, but that idea had not been popular last time, and as she stood there hesitating she heard a sound from outside. " What was that, Niall?"

" I didn't hear anything. Just be the sea, I expect."

" It wasn't the sea," she persisted, and Niall knew that Alison's hearing, like her eyesight, was exceptionally acute, and that if she said she heard something then there was something to be heard. So he switched off his torch and they emerged from the inner chamber to the coal cellar. Cautiously she peeped out and listened, then she said under her breath: " There's a boat down there."

He peered out into that dim greyness that to him was quite impenetrable: " I can't see a thing."

" It's just straight out from here." She drew in her breath. " I think it's a dinghy coming ashore from a yacht."

" Are you sure?" He was slightly irritated that he could make out absolutely nothing, but he did not question that she was right, and without waiting for her to reply he said: " The only yacht around here just now is the colonel's. Time we got out of here. Once the boat comes in to the rocks we'll be out of sight. Get ready to make a dash for the road."

"But, Niall," she whispered, "the path round to the gate is in full view of the rocks. If they looked up they'd be sure to see us even if they didn't know who we were."

"Gosh, yes! We'll have to go round the other side of the church and hide there till they've gone."

She nodded. This side of the church was built close to the boundary wall, from which it was separated by a solid wooden trellis with a gate in the centre. It would be safer to stay there than risk running back by the path.

Whoever was in the boat was rowing very carefully. It came ashore with the smallest amount of noise, and if the two standing in the shadow of the church had not been listening with every nerve on edge they would not have detected any sound apart from the cracking zoom of the waves as they splashed against the rocks. It was Alison who first caught the gentle bump of the boat as it grounded and she gripped his hand to warn him, then they both ran quietly along the strip of turf towards the side trellis. But when she put her hand on the handle it refused to turn. "It's locked, Niall—I can't open it." She made way for him, but though he turned and pressed it and almost forced the lock it did not give.

For a second or two they were too stunned to move. This set-back had never occurred to them, though all the church property was kept locked when not in use. But even as they stood there they knew there was not a second to lose. There was no cover here and in a minute at most the boatman would have clambered over the rocks and be up at the church.

"Shall we risk the path?" she whispered, but he shook his head. "No use. They'd spot us at once."

She could almost feel his thoughts racing through his head trying to work out a plan. " The only thing is to flatten ourselves against the wall here and hope they don't happen to look."

" But they might come up this way from the beach—it's the best way really, and if they do—— Listen, Niall—what about that other place next the coal cellar where they keep brushes and cleaning stuffs——?"

It wasn't much of a suggestion but at least it was better than standing against the wall, where anyone who passed could not fail to see them. They hurried back the way they had come, keeping on the grass to deaden their footsteps. Luckily, this apartment, if it could be called that, was unlocked, and they squeezed themselves inside, beside a motley collection of pails and brushes and grimy cloths and tins. She caught his elbow. Through the crack in the door a shadowy figure was faintly silhouetted against the sea.

" Quick," whispered Niall, dragging her in a little farther.

" Shouldn't we take the key out and lock it from the inside?"

He shook his head. " They might hear us, and anyway if they found it locked they'd be sure to try and get in. S-sh."

He paused and caught her hand and they both stood there, tense and still. Waiting. Listening. They could hear nothing, but there was somebody outside the door. Niall gripped her hand so tightly that she nearly cried out. In here it was completely dark with not the vestige of a light. But somebody was trying to open the coal cellar without the help of a torch. Working almost in silence too. Alison felt that every breath she drew must be audible to that unseen worker through the half-closed door. At last came the sound of the careful fitting of a key into a lock and a murmured remark.

" There must be two of them," Niall said, in her ear.

" S-sh! They'll hear you." And perhaps he too felt he had been a little unwise for he said nothing more. There was no more sound from next door. The minutes passed with agonizing slowness. Alison's whole body ached from holding it stiffly in one position but she dared not relax. Surely it couldn't take them all this time simply to glance round that small whitewashed cupboard! Were they tapping the walls? Could they have found something?

It was a comfort to feel Niall's warm grip of her hand. Still nothing happened. It was difficult to calculate the time, but it must be pretty nearly half an hour since they came in here. Could the men possibly have finished their job and be away? She was about to ask Niall what he thought when once again there came the unmistakable sound of a key being turned in a lock, and a man's voice said quietly but clearly enough for them both to hear: " What about this other place next door? Might be worth trying."

It was the colonel!

As he spoke the door into their hideout was pushed slowly open. Alison went all stiff, holding herself taut. This was the end. They were sure to be caught now—and after that, what? The terrifying thought flashed through her brain that suppose the colonel dragged them down to the sea and dropped them over the rocks nobody would ever find out what had become of them. The door was almost wide open now and her heart was thumping so hard that it hurt. For a moment she closed her eyes and opened them to see a thin trickle of light play for a minute among the brooms and pails scattered about the floor. She held her breath. She couldn't bear any more.

And at that precise second the torch was snapped off and the colonel said: " No—that doesn't fit in with . . ." She couldn't hear the end of the sentence. She drew a long breath, but Niall, so to say, interrupted her in the middle of it. " Careful," he said, under his breath, " they may be just outside."

So they remained there without moving and it was several minutes before they heard a muffled sound. Alison opened the door a fraction and looked through the chink above the hinge. Two indistinct figures could just be seen moving towards the beach.

She slipped round the door. " Wait for me, Niall. I'm going down to the rocks after them."

This was utterly unlike Alison. Up to a point she got a certain relish out of these adventures, but she was really afraid of being out in the dark and usually she followed Niall and did as she was told without trying anything on her own. But just now she realized that this was more of a job for her, because she could see so much better than he could and there was just the chance that she might hear something too.

But when she made to loose her hand he held it the more tightly. " Not by yourself, you're not. I'm coming with you."

" It's easier for one," she protested. " Let me go, Niall. I shan't go right down——"

" What are you going for anyway?" he whispered.

" I want to try and find out who the other man is."

" Don't be daft, Alis. As if you could, in this light."

" I'm going all the same," she said, tugging at her hand, and as he would not release her they crossed the patch of grass that sloped down to the shore together, keeping some yards to the left of the path taken by the colonel and his friend. Now Niall went first as usual and took command. " Keep close to me, and if you walk on a loose stone or slip, stop at once and stay absolutely still."

" There's a high rock just ahead," whispered Alison. " Perhaps we could hide there and wait till they've rowed off."

" Unless they've gone."

She shook her head. " No, I'd have heard them, I think. You can't start without the rowlocks making some noise."

They reached the rock and she was edging herself round it when he pulled her back. From the other side of the rock there came the sound of voices. " They must be right under us here——"

Pulling her back he looked cautiously over the top, and could dimly make out two figures in a small boat about ten feet below. She tugged at his elbow. " Make room for me, Niall, and I'll listen——"

" There isn't room. Besides, they'd see you."

" I'll be careful."

" Don't be silly, they've got a torch."

She said no more but slipped round the other side which protruded farther, and crawling out to the tip, in a way that would have made her uncle's hair stand on end could he have seen her, she lay flat and listened.

In a minute or two she was back with Niall in the shelter of the rock. " Lucky we came down here. They've gone back up to the church to have a look in that cleaner's place where we were."

" No wonder Uncle said his Mr. X was slick. Pretty thorough too. Don't move in case there's somebody left on the yacht. Oh, do sit still, Alis—don't wriggle."

"You'd wriggle yourself if you were sitting in a pool of water."

"'Reeling and writhing', seeing your name is Alis."

She smothered an inclination to giggle. Really, Niall was awful—quoting at a time like this when other people would be scared to breathe in case they were heard. The rock was desperately hard and her kilt was sopping. "I wish they'd hurry," she whispered, after what seemed a very long time.

Then some falling pebbles on the beach below warned her, and looking behind the rock she saw the shadowy outline of two men descending to the shore. With unbelievable quietness they pulled up the dinghy, stepped aboard and softly rowed back to the yacht, which was now quite invisible against the grey of the sea. In a matter of seconds the dinghy and her occupants were swallowed up in the darkness.

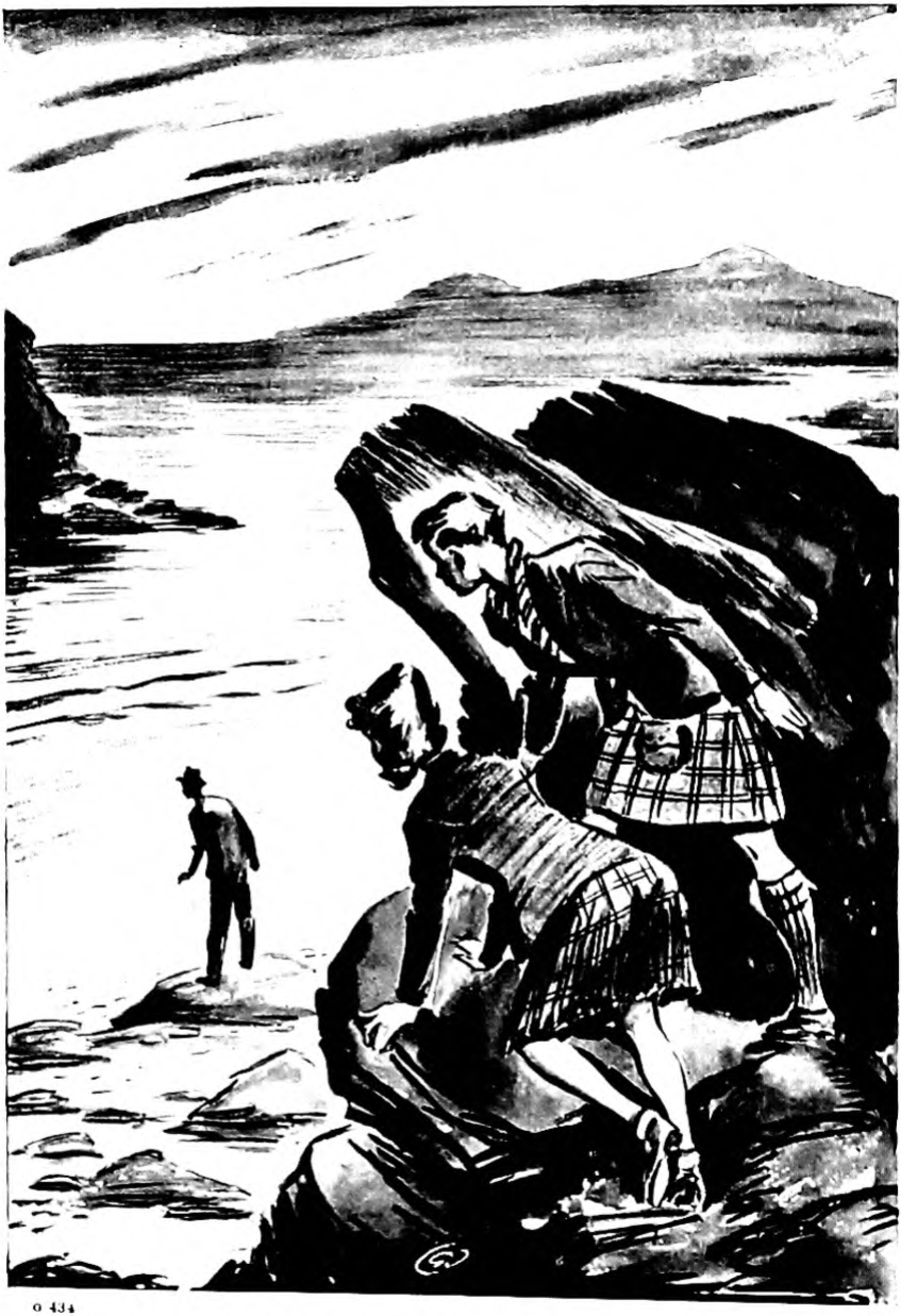
Niall rose to his feet. "Exit the villain. Come on, Alis. Time for us to hop it too." He stood staring out seawards. There was a slight squeak of the rowlocks and no other sound but that of the waves breaking here and there against the rocks.

She was about to reply to him when a movement attracted her attention, and clutching his arm fearfully they waited. One or two pebbles had clattered on the edge of the shingle where a few minutes since the boat had lain. "Niall—there's somebody else on the beach."

With extreme caution Niall peered round the sharp outline of rock. Quickly he drew back again. A tall figure stood by the water's edge, gazing out in the direction of the yacht, though it was not possible for him to distinguish anything. The sea now was smudgy and vague, just a vast nothingness. Alison and Niall listened with him but no sound came back except the ceaseless swirl of the water.

Then Alison looked down once more and was just in time to see the man turn inland and climb noiselessly back over the rocks. She turned slowly, with a scared face.

" Niall," she whispered breathlessly, " it's Uncle!"



" THERE'S SOMEBODY ELSE ON THE BEACH "

Page 175

CHAPTER XI

Locked Out!

" Uncle!" exclaimed Niall in dismay. " How could it be? Are you sure?"

" Well, of course I couldn't see properly, but it was somebody about his height——"

" It might be Hamish," he pointed out. " Anyway, we'd better hang on here for a bit to let him get away. We don't want to bang into him before we're clear of the church. A bit of poisonous luck that we weren't away before he appeared."

" Yes, but think if we'd met him," said Alison, shivering as she drew her blazer closer round her neck.

" Mm," he agreed. " That would be a bit grim."

By now they were both feeling somewhat depressed. The evening's escapade, with all that they had discovered about the colonel's activities, was going to end very flatly indeed if they had to crawl home and meekly face up to a good-going row and a prohibition regarding any future clues that they might discover. For Niall this meant the depths of disappointment, and even Alison, who always insisted that she took part in these adventures because he bullied her into them, hoped Mr. Campbell would not discover what they had been up to.

Now that the excitement was over, Alison realized how desperately cold it had become. Her woolly jersey and blazer, which were all right for visiting at Achnamara, could hardly be called an ideal costume for perching on cold hard rocks at midnight, and the wind had gone round to the north and blew in from the sea in fierce little angry gusts. She wished she could count ten and find herself warmly tucked up in bed.

At last Niall said: " Pretty safe now, I should think, but mum's the word till we get back to the road."

Over the rocks they clambered, then up the uneven grassy slope to the path through the graveyard, all in silence. It was pleasant to be moving again, and Niall was carefully closing the latch of the gate behind himself and Alison when they had their next surprise.

From the shadows on the opposite side of the road a tall figure detached himself and slowly crossed to meet them. " Oh, gosh—Uncle!" Alison murmured, half under her breath. But the tall figure was not Mr. Campbell.

" Mr. Murchison!" they both exclaimed as he came forward.

The minister let out a long quiet whistle. " So it's you, you young villains!" he said, almost as casually as if he had met them leaving Sunday school.

" Who did you think it would be?" asked Niall, with what Alison thought was considerable presence of mind.

But Mr. Murchison gave no answer to that one. " An unusual hour for you to be attending church," he said.

Niall grinned and said, " Mm." If the minister could avoid making direct statements, then so could he. But Alison could not be so composed. It seemed rude somehow just to stand there and make no explanation of what was, after all, a very unusual situation, and she murmured, rather foolishly: "We're just going home now."

Niall chuckled. "Strange as it may seem! By the way, Mr. Murchison, do you happen to know if Uncle and the others are back yet?"

"It must be a good half-hour since I left them at the cross-roads, so I imagine they are."

"So that's us for it all right." He cast a despairing glance at his sister. "Come on, Alis. Better go and get it over."

Mr. Murchison cleared his throat. "Would it be indiscreet if I asked you what brought you among the tombs at this time of night?"

Alison was glad of the darkness that hid her expression, but Niall said, with the hint of laughter in his voice, "'Gilded tombs do worms unfold'."

"You are completely unsquashable, Niall, as Hamish remarks."

Niall was not sure whether there was a hidden reproof behind these words, and he said quickly: "I didn't mean to be cheeky, Mr. Murchison. And I expect you've a pretty good idea of why we're here."

The minister smiled. "Well—I might guess. Would it have something to do with the gilded tombs you mentioned just now?"

Niall gave a slight gasp. He hadn't grasped that there might be a double meaning in it when he gave the quotation. The word "gilded" was startlingly fitting. "N-not exactly," he said.

"I don't want you to tell me anything that would make you uncomfortable. But knowing you both and what you've done in the past, I take for granted that you're not out at midnight for the good of your health. Contradict me if I'm wrong, but I presume you are interested in the gangster who is officially in these parts."

They nodded. One thing that appealed to them about Mr. Murchison was that he didn't talk down to them, but discussed things sensibly.

" I sympathize thoroughly with you in trying to work out the solution for yourselves—if that's what you're doing, and perhaps you are farther on than we are. Only there's just this, and I know you will both admit it—what matters most is the catching of this criminal, not the person who catches him."

" Yes, we were both saying that to-night," said Alison.

" It's a bit late—or should I say early?—to go into things now. How would it do if you two and myself got together and talked things over? I shan't force you to tell me anything you don't want to, and I shan't pass anything on to anyone without your permission."

" Thanks," said Niall.

" What are you going to say to your uncle if he's still waiting up for you?"

Niall smiled wryly. "That's what we'd like to know."

" Would you like me to come along with you as a stand-by?"

" It's awfully good of you," said Alison, hoping he *would* come, but Niall shook his head. If Mr. Murchison was with them they couldn't hope to hide what they'd been doing—and not only what they had been doing that night. " Thanks a lot, Mr. Murchison. But—no use your being mixed up in our troubles."

" All right." They guessed he was smiling. " Like to stand on your own feet? Maybe you're right. Well, come and have tea with me to-morrow. Usual time—four o'clock."

" The others will be sure to want to come too," said Alison.

" I don't think so. I believe your family are going to Tigh-an-eas."

" Okay. We'll be there. By the way, Mr. Murchison, would you mind if we asked you just one question?"

" Hamish says that your questions are equal to twenty of anyone else's. But carry on, though I don't promise to answer."

" Did you—did you find out anything—here—tonight?"

" Not a thing, Niall. And what about you two? Did Lord Peter Wimsey have any luck?"

He gently pushed Alison down the road as he replied: " Mm. Yes. A little." And with a hurried good night lest the minister should pursue the point they walked smartly away towards the village.

" What *are* we going to say to Uncle?" said Alison, when they were nearly at the Cottage.

" Oh, don't ask me," he replied unhappily. " I don't know why we should have jibbed at telling Mr. Murchison what we knew, when in ten minutes Uncle will have wormed everything out of us." Carefully he opened the gate. " Well, here we are. We'll have to ' screw our courage to the sticking point '. Leave the explaining to me if Uncle is ratty." Instinctively he had lowered his voice, then he pointed to the darkened house. " Looks as if they're all in bed. No lights at all."

They tiptoed round the side of the house, walking gingerly on the loose gravel, which crunched under their footsteps in spite of their care. They were sure they *must* be heard. At the front too every room was dark.

" Cheers," he whispered. " We're in luck after all.

They must have thought we were in." They moved round to the front door, which except in winter was rarely locked. Cautiously Niall turned the handle, and gave a gasp of dismay. "It's locked."

She leaned against the porch. "Niall—it's never locked."

"It's locked to-night. You wait there while I try the french window. There's always the chance they might have left it."

He was back in less than a minute. "It's locked too."

"Oh, Niall!"

"One thing, anyhow. They can't know we've been out all this time. Uncle would never lock up if he imagined we weren't in."

She nodded, but it did not cheer her as much as it might have done. She was desperately sleepy. More than anything else she wanted to go to bed. A real bed. Not some makeshift. "Where are we going to sleep?"

"Garage, I suppose, if it's open." But though it was often left unlocked, this night it was securely bolted, as was the tool-shed. "Looks as if we've bought it. Where do we go from here?"

"Perhaps Mr. Murchison would put us up at the Manse?"

"I dare say he would, but what about the morning, when we've got to come back and tell our tale to the family. I tell you what, I think I can climb up the side of the porch, then wriggle along the slates to my room, and come down and open the front door for you."

"Oh, Niall, could you?"

The porch jutted out to the side of the house and its flat roof was almost alongside Niall's bedroom, and more than once Hamish, as well as Niall, had found it a convenient entrance when they wanted to slip in unseen, but Niall had never before climbed it without help. He pulled off his blazer and handed it to Alison, and had his hands outstretched to begin the climb when suddenly she dragged him back. "You can't, Niall. The paint's wet."

With a stifled exclamation he gingerly dabbed a finger along the ledge. "It's wet all right." And as if to emphasize the fact the moon emerged from behind a cloud just then and in its light they could see the glistening sheen of paint freshly applied. "Gosh! I'd forgotten the painters were here to-day."

"It would have been worse if you'd begun to climb," she said practically, as they went round to the back of the house once more. They paused by the dining-room window. "*Now* are we going to the Manse?" By this time she did not care, or thought she did not care, what happened. A starling, disturbed, chirruped noisily in the bushes beside them. "Oh, listen to that bird. It must be near morning."

"Rubbish! It won't be light for hours yet." And because he was Niall he could not resist adding:

> "'It is not yet near day;
> It was the nightingale and not the lark,
> That pierced the fearful hollow of thine ear.'"

By now she was very tired. All the thrill of the night's excitement had vanished, her eyes were so heavy she could scarcely keep them open, and it did not amuse her to have Shakespeare quoted to her in the middle of the night. "I'm not interested in nightingales, and if you won't come with me to the Manse I'm going to ring the front-door bell."

Unconsciously she had raised her voice a little, and before Niall could reply there came the harsh grating noise of a window immediately above them being pushed up. As they glanced up Hamish's head appeared. " Is that you, Niall?" he asked in a whisper.

" Yes, we're both here. Can you let us in?"

There was a muffled exclamation of disgust. " Go to the back door, then."

Niall grinned as they walked over the tell-tale gravel once more. " He's remembering how the front door squeaks."

Certainly the back door did not squeak. So noiselessly was it opened that, although they were expecting it, they both started when the door was gently pulled back and Hamish stood there in the shadows. " You young blighters! Where on earth have you been?"

Now the last thing Niall had any intention of doing was to tell his brother how they had spent the late evening, but as he said afterwards to Alison: " He sounded so grumpy that I thought if I didn't tell him he might close the door in our faces again."

So he said briefly: " We were along at the church."

They felt rather than saw Hamish stiffen. " Oh! After the colonel?"

" Yes," said Niall, and as they stepped inside Hamish quietly closed the door behind them. " You can tell me about it in the morning."

As they followed him through the hall Niall tugged at his arm. " You won't say anything to Uncle?"

" About your being locked out and having to be let in after midnight? Don't be an idiot."

" I didn't mean that." The Campbells never gave each other away. " I meant about our being along at the church."

But Hamish was making no promises. He flashed a torch for a moment as they came to the foot of the stairs, put his finger to his lips, and in a solemn procession they slowly went up. Alison reflected sleepily that if Niall had a chance he would have muttered: "And so to bed!" On the top landing Hamish caught Alison's elbow and breathed in her ear. "Better not put on your light."

"Okay," she whispered, and noiselessly let herself into her room.

With a tremendous effort both Alison and Niall were down in time for breakfast next morning, and as he helped himself liberally to cream on his porridge Mr. Campbell beamed approvingly on them. "I'm always telling you two that if you go to bed at a decent hour you'll have no difficulty in getting up in the morning."

Having assured himself that his uncle was not indulging in heavy sarcasm, Niall managed a fairly natural grin, but Alison, less sure of herself, kept her eyes on her plate as she unfolded her napkin.

Mr. Campbell went on: "I was very pleased when I came in to find you had gone straight upstairs. Most sensible. Though I expect that Alison, at least, would read for a bit before putting the light out."

"N-no. No, I didn't read at all last night."

"Quite a record for Alison, I should say," remarked Hamish.

Niall murmured something about "a shining morning face" and Mr. Campbell continued: "How did you enjoy your visit to Achnamara? You met Mrs. Macdonald, Hamish says."

"Yes. She was on the sofa. I was beside her most of the time."

"But not on the sofa," Niall said flippantly.

"I hope you asked her to come along one day," said Mary from the top of the table. "She must be very bored without any friends. Is she a nice woman?"

"Oh yes." Alison felt she was on dangerous ground here, but as Mary seemed to expect her to say something more she added, with a nervous smile: "She asked an awful lot of questions, though."

"What about?" asked Mr. Campbell. He spoke casually, but she had the impression that her reply to this might be important. Still she hesitated.

"Oh- -she wanted to know what Niall and I did—how we amused ourselves. What we did on sunny days and what we did in rain."

"I expect she was just being polite," said Mary smoothly.

"If it's a mark of politeness to ask questions, *Shona* must be the politest female in Sutherland," said Niall, skilfully changing the subject.

"Did you see Shona last night, Uncle?" asked Alison, following Niall's lead.

"She was playing billiards with us."

"The chances that girl has!" exclaimed Niall. "She only has to wish for a thing and Sir Angus waves his wand."

"A new idea to think of Sir Angus as a fairy queen," laughed Hamish. "Incidentally, Shona's coming down first thing after breakfast. Said something about wanting to apologize to Alison for something she said. And she has some bright thought that you might like to bathe with her."

"She's mad," said Niall, helping himself to marmalade.

"You can't bathe in April," said Alison.

"Shona can apparently," said Mr. Campbell.

" There's to be a swimming gala at her school next term and she is very anxious to do well."

" I bet Sir Angus has promised her some trifle such as a trip to Australia if she wins," said Niall grimly.

" I believe there was some talk about her getting a motor boat for herself."

" I wonder what it feels like to get anything you want," said Alison.

" Spare yourself the effort, my child," said Niall, ruffling her hair as he passed her chair. " It's not a sensation you're likely to have."

Hamish pushed back his chair. " Well, here's to a good morning on the Clarig. Ready in ten minutes, Uncle. Anybody else coming?"

" I am," said Mary. " What about you two?"

" Include me out," said Niall, " as the famous film magnate said. I suppose we'll have to go and swim with Shona. Alison can please herself, but if I don't go in, she'll say it's because I'm not English."

" Sooner you than me," said Hamish, shivering.

" You mustn't stay in long," said Mary. " The sea is cold at this time of year."

" I shall dive in and dive out," said Alison. She went to the window as a bicycle bell sounded. " Goodness, there she is already!"

As she went through to the lounge, Shona came in by the french window. She thrust a parcel into Alison's hands. " Sorry I bit your nose off yesterday about the chocolates. When I talked to Uncle about it he said of course you hadn't taken them and he made me say I'm sorry. So now I've said it, and Mummie sent these sweets to make up. Open them up and see if you like them. I think you're sure to. They're terribly good ones."

"Were they specially flown north?" Niall asked gravely, as Alison tore off the wrappings.

"Cheeky as usual!" said Shona.

Alison opened the box. "Oh, they look heavenly, Shona—have one. We can have some later as a chittery bite."

"As a what?"

"I expect you call it a bathing bite in England."

"But chittery is a far better word," said Niall.

"Shona, do you really want to bathe?"

"I don't *want* to," pouted Shona, "but Uncle is terribly keen that I win the school cup and I don't want to disappoint him."

Niall chuckled. "Now now, Shona, come clean. We've heard all about the motor boat he's promised you——"

"Well, there's that too, of course."

"And what do we get if we come and swim with you?"

She tossed back her curls. "Why should *you* get anything?"

"Why shouldn't we? Not much catch bathing on a freezing day like this."

Shona considered and then she smiled, and when Shona liked she could smile very attractively. "You ought to do it just because I ask you. But I tell you what, if you come in with me, and stay in as long as I do and show me how you do that fast stroke, then I'll ask Uncle to let you fish the Clarig as often as you want."

"Huh!" said Niall. "We do that pretty well already—so long as your uncle hasn't guests of his own on the river."

"Never mind him, Shona. He's talking rubbish. Of course we'll teach you all the strokes we know.

Only I hope you won't want to stay in too long, it's so jolly cold."

"It isn't cold once you're in—and down."

"Isn't it indeed?" said Niall. "I shall remind you of that when I hear you yelling your head off."

"I don't yell." Then she said seriously: "But I do want to be able to swim decently. I know I'm pretty rotten——"

"Sure you're feeling quite well?" Niall inquired anxiously. "That remark is not like you. 'Not stepping o'er the bounds of modesty.'"

"Haven't the foggiest notion what that means. Poor Alison! I don't know how you can bear listening to all that stuff from Tennyson or whatever it is."

"I *don't* listen—much," smiled Alison. They were sitting dangling their legs over the garden wall, and now she jumped neatly on to the beach below. "Let's go and play about with the boats."

"A pity your school hasn't a boating competition and we could coach you for that as well," said Niall, as they dug their footsteps into the soft yellowy sand that at this time of year had a crisp, dark brown surface. He winked at Alison. "I seem to remember that your boating prowess—ahem! good phrase that! —leaves something to be desired."

"If you refer to the time when Alison fell into the water——"

"I didn't fall into the water," Alison said indignantly. "I went ashore to get your camera for you and you couldn't bring the boat in, and you dropped an oar overboard and I had to jump in and fetch it——"

"And it took you a long time to fetch it too," snapped Shona.

"The sea was very rough, and anyway, I did get it."

"Lucky for you too that you did. I mean, if you hadn't—well——" She did not like to say in so many words that Alison had saved her life. "If you hadn't you wouldn't have had the *Clan Campbell*."

As soon as she spoke Shona had the grace to feel a little ashamed of herself. She knew that without Alison's help that day at Black Cliffs she would have been swept goodness knows how far out to sea. And though she loved arguing with the Campbells, she did not want to have a row to-day or they might refuse to come and bathe with her, so she said with a smile: "It's so long ago now—don't let's quarrel about it."

"'Course not," said Alison quickly, while Niall added with a wicked glint in his eyes: "It would be horrid if Shona had to say she was sorry twice on the same morning."

"Niall, that's beastly of you!" Alison turned impulsively to Shona. "Besides, I should really have apologized to you—about losing my temper yesterday."

"Here, I say," cut in Niall, "if you two are going all noble I'm going off on my own."

Shona laughed, her frowns evaporating. "Let's hunt for crabs."

Alison held out a long trail of vivid green seaweed. "Wouldn't that make a gorgeous belt—for you, Shona? Green suits you."

"You'd have to dry it first," said Shona.

"And when it's dry it's got no colour. Better stick to crabs," said Niall. "You can always eat them."

"Funny that when you put seaweed back into the sea it gets its colour back again, and when you put other things in it takes the colour out."

"Like my shoes!" exclaimed Shona, who had slipped into a pool. "Look—see how patchy they are. New ones too."

Niall raised his eyebrows. "But why you put on a decent pair of shoes when you knew you'd be mucking about the beach, beats me. And didn't you ruin a new frock last summer when you went climbing with it or something?"

"It wasn't really ruined." She glanced ruefully down at her feet. "Still, I suppose it was silly to put these on this morning. Only I loathe old clothes."

Alison laughed. "Then you must be in a perpetual state of hate when you look at us. We haven't anything else." She looked down at her kilt. "Niall says the ancient Campbell is well named."

"We have an occasional flash of respectability when we're travelling to and from school," grinned Niall.

"Especially going to school—after Mary's been working on us."

"Mm," said Shona vaguely. Certainly the Campbells were shabby and yet the things they wore always looked somehow all right. It almost annoyed her that they did not seem to care that they went around in clothes that were not merely old but which were often mended as well. Across the front of Alison's blazer a jagged tear had been neatly repaired, and there was a patch on one of Niall's sleeves, but neither of the Campbells appeared conscious of these defects nor of the contrast between their blazers and her own, which was less than a month old.

"Let's sit down on this rock—this one will do, it's nice and flat. And it's quite dry too. Only the rocks are like the seaweed—they're far prettier when they're wet. Look at that exciting pinky one."

"I shouldn't call rocks exciting at any time," said

Shona, squatting down and scraping some limpets off into the sea."

" Oh, don't do that, Shona. It's cruel."

" Nonsense," laughed Shona, drying her hands on her kilt. " Oh—you didn't tell me how you got on at Achnamara yesterday."

Alison was suddenly silent and Niall said: " Do you mean afternoon or evening?"

" Evening. Hamish told me what a dud day you'd had and about your breaking your rod. Awfully bad luck! Donald says that loch is no use. Pity you weren't on the river. Uncle says it's smashing."

" Unfortunately we were not invited to fish the river," Niall said drily.

Shona beamed. " The colonel's a great friend of mine. I'll make him give us a day on his old river. Didn't he suggest it when you were along in the evening?"

She was looking at Alison, who shook her head. " I wasn't talking to him much. I was with Mrs. Macdonald. We weren't speaking about fishing."

" What did you talk about?"

" Oh—nothing much. She was on a sofa by the fire."

" Sounds mouldy to me," said Shona, perhaps not altogether sorry that for once the Campbells had not enjoyed themselves apart from her. " But I do like the colonel. He came in to see us on his way back from the Junction."

Niall and Alison studiously avoided looking at each other. They did not want to discuss the colonel with Shona. He threw a flat stone into the sea so that it " scliffed " along the surface of the water in a series of hops, while Alison poked at the lichen growing on the rock.

" And did you have a pleasant time?" asked Niall, with unusual politeness.

" You always have a nice time with the colonel. He's very charming," she said, in her most grown-up manner. " But he didn't wait very long. He had called to see if anybody had found the safety-pin of his kilt. He had dropped it when he was dining the other evening."

" We knew he had lost it," Alison said, trying to speak casually. " There was a notice in the shop about it."

Niall threw another stone into the water. " And was it found?" he murmured indifferently.

" Oh yes. Polly, the housemaid, had given it to Mummie."

A wave suddenly sprayed over the rock and played about their feet before it receded again. Niall sprang to his feet. " Come on, Shona—what about that bathe?"

As they were going through the garden Alison said: " You'd better wait and have lunch with us."

" Okay," said Shona casually. " I said to Mum you'd probably ask me."

CHAPTER XII

The Secret of the Library

Tea-time at the Manse, and Alison and Niall were there in the study with Mr. Murchison. Surprisingly, Hamish was also there. Between lunch and tea Alison and Niall had put in rather a gruelling time. As soon as they had seen Shona off on her bicycle—and it was obvious that with very little persuasion she would have remained at the Cottage for tea—Hamish put a hand on a shoulder of each.

" I think we've time to walk along and have a look at the *Clan Campbell*. Uncle said we might take it out as soon as the sea is calmer."

Niall exchanged doubtful smiles with Alison, then raising his eyebrows he said to Hamish: " I suppose this is the family equivalent of a talk in the Head's study?"

" Right first shot," Hamish said cheerfully. " Or it might be more accurate to say the House-master's study."

" Meaning that the talk with the Head—otherwise Uncle—is still to come!"

Hamish laughed, but there was a grim note in his voice as he said: " This is not a guessing competition, nor is it your favourite game of twenty questions. It is a sober inquiry into the nocturnal doings of one Alison and one Niall Campbell."

"Huh!" said Niall moodily. "Okay—get it over. Where do we begin?"

"I should have thought that was obvious—elementary, my dear Watson. You begin by telling me where you went last night after you left me. Oh, I know you said you'd been at the church, but I want the story in full."

"Alison and I decided to make a few investigations."

"I don't call that a very clear reply."

Niall frowned and gazed ahead. When Hamish used this superior grown-up-brother voice he felt very young indeed. He also felt a little peeved. Hamish wasn't so very old himself. "Oh, come off it, Hamish. You know quite well what we were after."

"I think you'd better tell me."

Niall gave a cocky little tilt to his head. "Why should I?"

"Among other reasons, there is the matter of your both being locked out last night. You should thank your lucky stars it was I who happened to be awake and not Uncle." He lit a cigarette. "You mentioned the colonel last night. I take it you have decided that he is the crook?"

"Why ask us, then! It's not awfully sporting of you. Granted we shouldn't have been out at midnight, but you know that Uncle promised to let us in on anything else exciting that might turn up. Then he took back his promise. He told us nothing except that the colonel was not the man he was after. And if he isn't, why shouldn't we find out what kind of man he actually is?"

"You don't agree with Uncle, in other words?"

"Well—we think he knows something about the jewels."

"I see. And have you found out anything in the course of your—er—investigations, Lord Peter?" He had dropped his superior tone and spoke in his usual friendly way.

But Niall was non-committal. "A few bits and pieces."

"You wouldn't care to pass on what you know, I suppose?"

"If you like. But only if you promise not to tell Uncle."

"Your name should be Shylock. But I'm afraid I can't bargain with you. If there was anything I thought Uncle ought to know I'd have to tell him, don't you see. However, I suppose I am right in imagining you thought the cache for the jewels was in the smugglers' den at the church?"

"We did," began Niall, and Alison, who was longing to share all their knowledge with Hamish, interrupted: "But we don't think so now—but we know the colonel hoped to find them there last night. He was there with another man." She glanced at Niall. "It's all right saying that, isn't it, because Mr. Murchison was there too——"

"That's why we're going there to tea. He thought we should have a pow-wow together," said Niall.

"Another talk in the House-master's study," said Hamish, pursing his lips. "All right. I shan't ask you anything more till you've been there."

By now they had reached the steep incline leading down to the boathouse, and once they had opened the wide doors and saw inside the lovely lines of the *Clan Campbell*, not even the thought of the colonel and his accomplices could distract their attention from the boat, with its fresh cream and green paint. They always had a thrill just from looking at the *Clan Campbell* and realizing that she belonged absolutely to them. The small rowing boats belonged to the family in general, but the motor boat was Alison's and Niall's.

But on the way back to the Cottage, with their thoughts once more on the colonel, Niall said suddenly: "Look here, Hamish, if you're not going to Tigh-an-eas after all, why not come with us to the Manse?"

"I wish you would," said Alison, feeling that she would be happier if Hamish knew as much as they did.

So here they were sitting in a circle round a blazing fire in the Manse study. "This is gorgeous," said Alison, stretching out her hands to the heat.

Mr. Murchison threw on another log. "It's gone cold in spite of the sun."

Hamish laughed. "You wouldn't believe these two have been bathing this morning, with Shona."

Mr. Murchison's eyes twinkled. "Not from choice, I'm sure."

"It was petrifying," said Alison, laughing; "but Shona said she didn't feel it."

The minister rose to open the door for Miss Scott, who was bringing in the tea-trolley. "Will you do the honours, Alison?" he asked, wheeling it beside her.

She looked at him doubtfully, and Niall said: "She thinks you mean the blessing."

"No, I don't. You don't have a blessing when it's only on a trolley."

"*Only* on a trolley!" giggled Niall, pointing to the heaped plates that filled the lower tray. "Please excuse my sister. She doesn't really mean what she says."

Mr. Murchison removed the tea-cosy. "Pour out, Alison, and don't worry what he says. We know what you mean." As he was handing round the cups, Miss Scott returned with a large dish of sandwiches and a muffin dish. "Oh, thank you, Miss Scott. That's grand. Niall, this is for you. Miss Scott says you once said you liked nothing better than hot buttered toast."

Niall went hot and red, remembering all the rather unkind things he and Alison had said about the Manse housekeeper. He smiled awkwardly at the prim figure, dressed as she always was in the navy-blue dress with the lace collar at the neck. "Thank you, Miss Scott."

"And there are doughnuts here for Alison—also made specially."

It was Alison's turn to feel uncomfortable. "Oh, but—that's terribly nice of you, Miss Scott. I simply adore doughnuts and we never have them at home."

Miss Scott gave a stiff little nod in response and her smile was as restrained as ever. She was one of those unfortunate people who feel nice inside but can't make it show. It was a wonderful tea, as it always was at the Manse, and there was nothing said about the real reason for their visit until they had finished.

When the tea-things had been taken away the atmosphere seemed to stiffen. Till now it had been pleasant, easy, friendly—four people enjoying a cup of tea together. But now, without any warning, it was different—taut and strung-up.

"You'll want to get down to brass tacks," said Hamish seriously to Mr. Murchison. "You know that Alison and Niall were sleuthing the colonel last night?"

"Well," said the minister, lighting his pipe, "I took for granted they were, but actually I don't know anything definite except that I met them—or saw them, perhaps I should say—when they were leaving the churchyard. It's up to them to tell us as much—or as little—as they feel inclined."

"Do you really mean that, Mr. Murchison?" asked Niall. "That we can tell you as little as we want to?"

"I mean it in one sense, yes. We haven't a priority on your secrets. But on the other hand, if there is anything you've found out that might help us to catch the crook, you might regret it later on if you didn't pass on your information. That is, supposing you had discovered something we didn't know."

Niall nodded. This was the line he had expected the minister to take. The usual grown-up stuff—sort of wrapped up in duty and what you ought to do without being told. As good as putting you on your honour to tell everything you knew. To him it seemed rather a one-sided business. He wriggled a little on his chair. "Suppose we tell you how far we've got, will you do the same with us?"

Mr. Murchison relit his pipe, which had gone out. "Quite frankly, if it depended on me I would. Apart from what you've done at other times in helping to pin down the various members of the gang, I consider that you are more likely to hit on clues than we are, and you are less likely to be suspected by the crook himself, just because you're—young." He smiled. "And also, thanks to your Uncle's advice, you have learned that it is not wise to appear to know more than you do—I refer to your criminal dealings, of course."

To Alison this sounded a little involved, but Hamish said, grinning: "It does not put a great strain on them to appear less intelligent than they are."

But Mr. Murchison had not finished. "These are my opinions, but, as you know, I am not the chief in this business."

"No; Uncle is, worse luck," said Niall.

"We know he's scared we get dragged into something and won't be able to get out again," said Alison.

"That's it in a nutshell," said Mr. Murchison. "And so what? Are we going to play ball together or not?"

There was silence for a minute or two. Hamish sat poking the fire in an abstracted manner, Mr. Murchison was still occupied with his pipe, Niall was playing aimlessly with a pencil, and Alison was the only one of the group who was sitting still.

From her chair she had an excellent view through the low-silled bow windows of the wide spread of the garden. Its borders were flanked by beds of daffodils that nodded gaily in the wind, there were circular patches of tulips still in bud, and the trees were very faintly tipped with green. She could see the kitchen garden where the rasps and strawberries made it a paradise for the Campbells in summer, and beyond were the smooth slopes of the Chiarmhor hills. To the right of all this gleamed the patchy greyness of the sea. Since lunch-time the wind had risen freshly, and she could see the occasional bursts of spray that foamed against the dark cliffs. There was nothing spectacular about it. It was typical of the Clarig she loved, and its quality of everydayness seemed more than ever attractive now in comparison with this affair that filled all their minds.

As she gazed dreamily at the sea she found herself thinking of Treasure Bay, several miles down the coast, and of her uncle's mysterious landing there from the sea-plane. There had never been any explanation of that nor of the secrecy that made it essential to pretend that Mr. Campbell had been at home for longer than he had.

Mr. Murchison's voice broke in on her thoughts. "What about it, then, Niall?"

"It's not just me you should ask, Mr. Murchison." He turned to his sister. "Alison has really done more than I have."

"Was last night's adventure her idea, then?"

She shook her head vehemently. "Oh, goodness, no! That was Niall's."

Another silence fell in the room. Alison did not know what to say. She realized that Niall felt that he and she were always shut out of things as soon as they began to be exciting. Like him, she felt it was hardly fair that they should share their knowledge while the grown-ups kept silent about what *they* knew. And yet—a pang of fear went through her as she remembered last night. All at once she was afraid. She felt this thing was too big for them to handle alone. She looked straight at Niall.

"I think we ought to tell them," she said.

"And what does Lord Peter Wimsey think?" asked Hamish, for Niall sat looking into the fire and had not moved.

He turned sharply and glanced from Hamish to the minister. "Well, all that we've found out concerns the colonel. But Uncle has told us that he's not the man, so"—he shrugged his shoulders—"what we know is not likely to be of much help."

Hamish rose and stood before the fire, leaning on the mantelpiece. "You know, Niall, that's all very well, but——"

"I know what you're thinking. That if you go to

Uncle and tell him we've found out something, he'll jolly well make us cough it up."

It looked like being a deadlock. Then Alison looked up at Hamish. "I expect we'll have to tell you in the end, but just to be going on with, will you tell us something?"

Hamish smiled grimly at the minister. "Another bargain-maker."

"And she's quite right," said Niall. "'This is the fool that lent out money gratis.' We both did—information at least, if not money. Why should it all be on our side?"

Mr. Murchsion folded his arms. "What is it you want to know, Alison?"

"I want to know why there was all that fuss when Uncle came home. Why did he come in that sea-plane and why did he land at Treasure Bay? Why was nobody supposed to know about it? Why did he pretend to be ill and that he'd been at the Cottage for some days before he actually was there?"

"May as well tell her, Hamish."

"Well, Uncle had orders from the Intelligence to go to Paris, where the gang were having a secret meeting of jewel thieves from all parts of the world. Uncle found out that another attempt was to be made to find the rest of the jewels that had been hidden around here, and that they were sending one of their high-ups to Clarig almost at once."

"But if the man came here, then he would recognize Uncle at once!" said Niall excitedly.

"Uncle thought not. He was acting as a waiter," explained Hamish. "As soon as the thing was settled the big noise was to leave Paris by air for Inverness. So Uncle chartered a plane ahead of him, came by

Oban, and with a little time in hand reached here before him. Naturally the gang must have suspicions by this time that Uncle does hush-hush work, and though he was pretty sure he hadn't been recognized in Paris, he didn't want to take any chances. And that was the reason for the build-up about his being at home when he was still away."

"Gosh!" exclaimed Niall. "And has Uncle seen this crook since he came home?"

Hamish sighed and glanced at the minister. "What would you do, chum?"

"Tell him the truth."

"So far as I know, Niall, Uncle has not seen him."

"So it definitely is not the colonel," said Niall in disappointed tones. "I know Uncle said it wasn't, but we kept thinking he must have made a mistake."

Hamish smiled at Alison. "Well, that's your question answered."

"Yes. Thank you."

"I don't know why Uncle didn't tell us that at the time," said Niall; then he said abruptly: "Look here, Mr. Murchison—Hamish, Alison and I know this affair is pretty serious, but will you give us till to-morrow and then we'll tell you everything?"

"Forgive me poaching on your preserves, Niall, but 'To-morrow will be another day'," said Mr. Murchison. "Why wait till then?"

Niall looked mysterious. "I have a reason for asking."

"You always have reasons," said Hamish, with an exasperated air, "but you never tell us what they are."

"But we *will* tell you to-morrow," Alison said brightly. She guessed what Niall was up to. The colonel and his accomplice had drawn a blank at the church, but there was still Clarig House, the other name mentioned on the paper. She could not imagine what it could be, but Niall must have some plan which he intended to carry out between to-day and to-morrow. If they did not find out anything there, then their detective work had failed.

" What do you say, Mr. Murchison?" asked Hamish.

The minister hesitated. " In a way I think this is a matter for Mr. Campbell to decide. From what he says, this crook is more dangerous and more unscrupulous than any of the others of the gang we've had, and it's the question of allowing you to run unnecessary risk. But if you're willing, Hamish, I agree to one more day."

" Only for goodness' sake don't go dashing your heads up against trouble, or I'll never hear the end of it from Uncle."

Alison smiled on them both and Niall straightened himself with a satisfied expression. " Thanks a lot." Then, grinning, he added:

> " 'I can no other answer make but thanks,
> And thanks—' "

" Take him home," said the minister, laughing, " before his quotations give out."

As they walked home Niall said: " Like to come and have a spot of fishing with us before supper?"

" Don't think so, thanks. I'm going to take the *Clan Campbell* out."

" Oh, goody! Could we come with you?" asked Alison.

" You could not."

"But why not?" she persisted, and Niall said: "You're not going to Achnamara, by any chance?"

"I might be." Then he tweaked Niall's ear. "It's no use, Niall. I've told you quite enough for one afternoon."

"I don't see why you won't take us with you."

"Uncle's orders," he said briefly.

"On no account allow the children to accompany you," said Niall in a deep voice that caught the exact inflection of his uncle's tone. "I suppose that's what he said."

"Something like that," admitted Hamish.

He swung off along the road to the boathouse while they perched themselves on the garden wall, swinging their legs. "Disgusting that we can't go with him," said Alison. "Seems a bit flat just to go and fish now on our own."

"We're not going to fish," he said quietly.

"What are we going to do, then?"

His eyes shone. "I'm trying to work out a plan. I didn't really mean to fish with Hamish, but I had to find out what he was going to do. Have you ever heard this quotation?" She tried to stop him but he went on:

"'Who seeks and will not take when once 'tis offered,
Shall never find it more.'

That's us to-day, Alis. We're going to snatch the opportunity and try and find out the secret of the library at Clarig."

"With Sir Angus and Shona and her mother in the house—not to mention the servants? Don't be silly, Niall."

"Idiot! As if I'd suggest it if they were at home.

Shona and her uncle and Mrs. Lessing are off to the Junction——"

"How d'you know?"

He pulled a face. "My secret spies. When I was in the post office after lunch the Clarig House chauffeur was grousing to Rab about having to drive all that distance. So we can prowl around with the place to ourselves."

"But how can we if they're out? The servants too——"

"Use your imagination, woman. We'll see if we can get in without being seen. If we can't, then we can ask if they mind our going to the library to borrow a book. You must have tumbled to it that that's why I asked Mr. Murchison to give us one more day."

She looked doubtful. "I don't see how it can be worked."

He grinned cheerfully. "Neither do I. By the way, as we said to Hamish we were going to fish, I think we'd better take our rods. It's useful to have an alibi."

So, carrying their fishing rods but without the usual paraphernalia, they made their way up the glen.

The river path was almost always soggy except in the height of summer, and the remains of last year's leaves were piled up in shiny yellow and brown masses against the foot of the tree trunks and tramped into the muddy track. Normally Alison loved this walk. She liked to dawdle and look about her and listen to the rushing sound of the river. She loved the giant-like arms of the ash trees and the elms; she loved the delicate birches with their silvery barks and the graceful way they swayed in the breeze, and very soon now the leaves would be out. She loved the tiny patches of colour made by the primroses and violets, and she loved the birds that were so gay during the Easter holidays. High above the trees a curlew flew past, giving its insistent call, and a thrush was singing somewhere just out of sight.

She stooped to pick some primroses growing on a bank of moss, and Niall turned impatiently: " Come on, Alis. We're not out on a Sunday school excursion."

" I shan't be a minute—they're so lovely."

" You can get them to-morrow. Do hurry." For she still lagged behind. " We haven't all day for this job."

With a few running steps she caught up with him. " What exactly are we going to do when we get to Clarig?"

" I'm sure I told you. Get to the library somehow or other and then work on the bookshelves till we find the secret entrance."

" The colonel knows about it and yet he hasn't apparently found the jewels," she pointed out.

" Then we've got to go a step further—hunt for the hiding-place. It's not at the church and therefore it's at Clarig House."

They were now near the strip of shrubbery that separated the river from the house, and carefully he laid the rods down in a deep bank of bracken. " They should be quite safe there till we come back." As they crossed the wide velvety lawn where they so often had had tea in summer, Alison glanced behind her—at the river appearing here and there through the screen of trees, at the stretch of moor and the golf course, and wished that she and Niall were out simply on a casual fishing expedition, instead of this adventure.

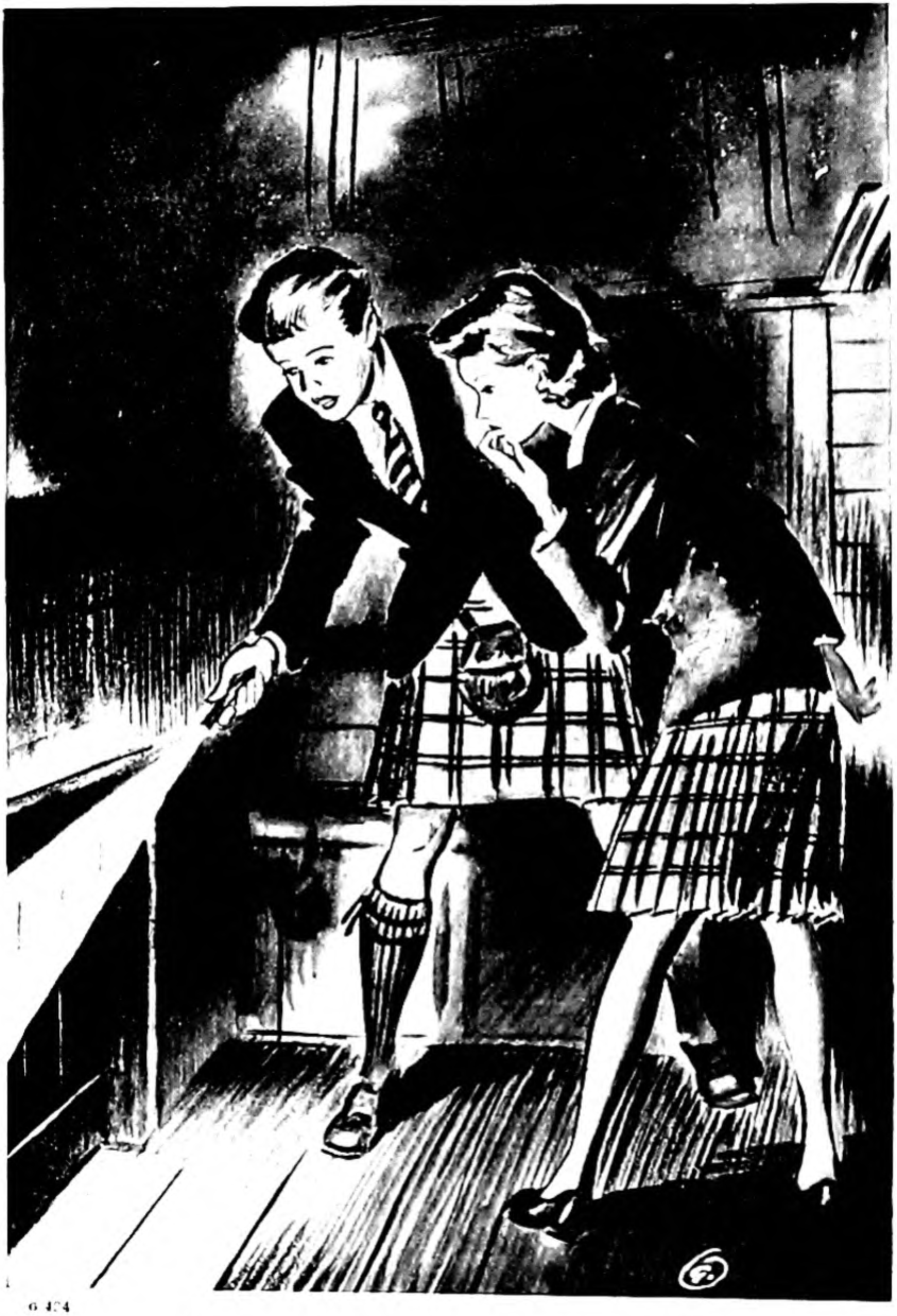
Clarig House, like many of the other houses near the coast here, was very old and had frequently been used by smugglers. It was a fascinating old place for children, and in the days when the Campbells' Aunt Hester had lived here they had often played hide-and-seek—up one stair and down another, along corridors from room to room, so that they knew its inside plan as well as they knew the Cottage.

They also knew its secret entrances. There were two. One led underground from a room on the ground floor, and followed a passage away from the house to reappear out on the moor. But this one had been closed up since before Sir Angus came to Clarig. The other one, properly speaking, was not an entrance at all. It was more of a hidey-hole inside the house. Alison knew where it was, but she had never gone more than a few yards inside. But now, as her feet squelched a little on the damp grass, she found herself thinking about it, for no special reason at all. And from there her mind went to the library with its book-lined walls.

As yet they were hidden from the house by the shrubbery and she tugged Niall's arm excitedly. " Listen, Niall. Stop for a minute. I've just been thinking about that old entrance from the deep cupboard in the passage beside the flower room. Do you know where it leads to?"

" I'm not quite sure. Winds about the house, I suppose. Hamish has explored it but I haven't. Might be locked up now for all I know. Why?"

" Well, I just wondered—could the colonel possibly have used it to get to the library? It's only an idea, of course," she went on modestly. " But do you remember that day I saw him—or his reflection on the window at least? He didn't come through the hall to the library—or if he did he must have been stuck behind there



" THROUGH THERE—THAT'S WHERE WE GO "

Page 210

for ages—but suppose he made sure that everybody was out and then used this other entrance?"

"I suppose he *might* if he could get to it without being seen—and if he could, why shouldn't we? Is that what you're getting at?"

Her cheeks were now pink with excitement. "I thought we might go along to the flower-room entrance. The servants are hardly ever there in the afternoon and there's nobody else who could see us."

"I believe you've got something there." He fished in his pockets and produced his pencil torch. "Yes, it's working all right. No use trying to do this kind of job without a spot of light." He replaced it in his pocket. "We'll keep close to the shrubbery all the way." He lowered his voice. "Go quietly and don't talk, and if we meet anybody leave them to me."

This side of the house was completely deserted. It was well away both from the kitchen quarters and from the rooms used by the family. And in the grounds not even a gardener was in sight. Better still, the side door stood open. This was the oldest part of the house and the passage was of stone covered with matting. They stepped inside and listened. From far away came the muffled sound of laughter—the maids in the kitchen, they decided.

Their footsteps made no sound on the heavy matting and at the first door beyond the flower-room Niall paused. Like the other doors, it was heavily panelled and a large key protruded from the lock. It was not locked, however, but was kept shut by an old-fashioned latch, and when they raised this they found themselves looking at a deep cupboard filled with trunks and wooden cases. Glancing behind to make sure that no one had come through the baize door at the end of the corridor, they went inside and Niall pushed the door shut behind them.

" This doesn't look like a passage——" began Alison.

" Wait a minute." His eyes were dancing with excitement as he pointed to a low door in the corner hardly more than two feet high. " Through there—that's where we go. I remember Hamish showing it to me years ago. I'll go first, and when you get in, close the door after you."

It did not take long for them both to crawl through the aperture, and for a moment before Niall flashed his torch it was to Alison terrifyingly dark. She almost wished she had never thought of this secret entrance. Far better to have been discovered in the library by Sir Angus or Mrs. Lessing than be shut up in this tunnel-like passage. Then the light went on but she was glad to hang on to Niall's blazer.

" We'll have to go in single file—keep close,"—a warning which was entirely unnecessary.

The roof of the passage was low and they had to stoop nearly double, but it was comparatively wide, and by the light of the torch they saw that the stone floor was fairly even.

" Smells musty," she whispered.

" Of course. There's no fresh air. But it's a pretty marvellous passage to have been built inside the house. The walls must be frightfully thick at this part." She tripped and fell against him. " Do watch, Alis. We're going in the right direction for the library anyhow." Then he gave a startled exclamation. The passage had widened out very slightly and part of it branched off to the left. " And now where? A complete rabbit warren. I think we'll keep to the right."

He was speaking very softly, but she reached forward quickly, catching his elbow and speaking in his ear. " There's somebody behind us, Niall. I heard the cupboard door click. They must be coming along this passage."

Instantly his torch was out. " Flatten yourself against the wall," he said below his breath, and although her heart was beating with uncomfortable throbs and her knees were like jelly, yet something inside her wanted to giggle at this absurd remark. Flatten yourself when all the space was occupied by you just standing—how could you flatten yourself when you were doubled up? " If he comes this way we're done," he whispered.

A torch light appeared behind them and unconsciously she pressed hard against Niall. If the intruder came their way he must pass her first! Fortunately the light was focused on the floor. They guessed it was a man, but as he was behind the light they could see nothing. Fearsome thoughts raced across Alison's brain. Suppose this was *the* crook—the high-up gangster—suppose he had a knife or one of these guns that made no noise when you fired them—suppose he killed them there and then. Nobody knew they were here. No one would ever dream of looking for them in this old forgotten passage. Like the bride in the chest, it might be years before they were found. She was cold and very much afraid.

Then just as she felt she must yell, the torch swerved sharply to the side. He had turned along the other passage and the light gradually disappeared. Niall relaxed his grip on her elbow and they both breathed heavily. After a few seconds she whispered: " Would it be safe to go back now?"

" Back? What would we go back for? Besides, there might be an accomplice guarding the door." Slowly they went on, feeling their way and only switching on the torch occasionally. "Watch—there are some steps here."

He flashed on the light, and when they had climbed a small flight of stairs they were standing on a small platform, and surprisingly the ceiling above their heads was much higher here and they could stand upright. It rose to a point like the gable of a house, and as they looked up Alison pointed to a chain that dangled a foot or two from the top. "What can that be for, Niall?"

He gazed at it thoughtfully but shook his head. "Haven't the foggiest."

"It's rather like a skylight, isn't it, except that there isn't any glass."

He shone his torch directly on it. "Alis—you've hit it. It's not a window but it's a way of getting inside—from the roof. Now what——"

But at that moment, with an unexpectedness that made them jump, one of the hinged sides of the "window" was thrown back, letting in a cold current of air, and a hand appeared, resting on the ledge made by the opening. It moved slightly as if the owner were about to heave himself forward and lower himself inside. For a long second they stood there incapable of thinking, so utterly surprised were they, and then suddenly Alison stretched up her arm, caught the chain, and pulled it down, hard. The hand was withdrawn and the piece of wood fell into place again with a bang.

Then her courage faded. "What'll we do, Niall?" she whispered urgently.

"Time we got out of here anyway. We'll try and find the way through the library. It must be about here somewhere. I certainly don't fancy using the passage again to-day."

She heaved a sigh of relief and felt like repeating one of Niall's favourite quotations. How did it go? "For this relief much thanks." She just *couldn't* have walked down that narrow passage again—and if they could not find the secret they could at a pinch escape through the trap-door in the roof.

But the entrance to the library proved unexpectedly easy to find. After a little search they came on a bolt near the floor that was fairly conspicuous. Niall put a finger to his lips. "Careful in case there's somebody in the room." Cautiously he dragged it back and gently pushed the door inwards. On its other side were neat rows of bookshelves. They were in the library. It was empty.

"I wonder if there's a bolt on this side," he said, running his hand up and down. "No—nothing."

"Perhaps it just clicks shut," she suggested, and he nodded. "As we don't want to go back that way we might as well try and see." As he spoke he slowly pushed the bookshelves back, and so solid was the construction that they slid into position without a sound and could not be opened again.

"Pretty cute fellow who thought up that fixture. One way traffic only."

"Very cute," agreed Alison. But already she had left the narrow gallery and was slowly descending the steps into the room proper. Her one thought was to get out of Clarig House as quickly as possible. "Shall we go by the french window?"

"Y-yes. Then we can go round to the front door and ask officially if there's anyone at home."

It was as well they had decided to do this, for as they went round the crazy paving by the side of the house they saw Polly, the housemaid, come down the avenue. Alison immediately felt guilty, but Niall hailed her cheerfully.

" Hello, Polly. We've just been looking in at the library but there doesn't seem to be anyone about."

" No, I'm sorry, Master Niall. They're all away and we don't expect them back for a good hour yet. Will you not come in and wait?"

" No, thank you, Polly. We were on the river and we thought we'd just pop up when we were so near."

" I will tell Miss Shona you were here, then."

They scarcely spoke as they walked through the shrubbery and down to the river bank, where their rods were concealed. Niall " swished " his feet through the dead leaves, but Alison kept glancing through the thick hedge of laurels, afraid someone might be hidden there.

" Niall, we'll have to tell Uncle about this, to-night."

" We've still got till to-morrow, you know, and we still don't know where the stuff is hid."

" We'll have to tell him to-night," she repeated.

" I don't see it. Why shouldn't we take all the time we're entitled to?"

She looked around her fearfully and did not reply till they were clear of the shrubbery, then she turned to him seriously. " Because I know now who it is that Uncle is trying to catch."

" I suppose you mean the colonel?"

But Alison shook her head. " No. Not the colonel."

CHAPTER XIII

The Treasure is Found

Niall stopped in the act of taking the rods from the bracken and stared at her.

" Who do you mean, then? The man who was with the colonel at the churchyard?"

She hesitated. " Yes. I suppose so."

He snorted impatiently. "You don't sound very sure."

" Oh, but I am sure. Quite sure. It was just that I had forgotten about the man who came off the yacht."

They started moving down the muddy path. " I wish you'd try and tell me, whatever it is, in plain English."

" I know I sound a bit mixed up. I feel mixed up too."

As she paused he said: " Oh, come on, Alis. Skip the explanations. If you know the crook, let's have his name. Out with it."

" I expect you'll howl, but it's Mrs. Macdonald."

He did howl. His yell was half laughter and half scorn. " What? Did I hear you say ' missis '? Really, Alison——" Then he noticed how white she was and abruptly he dropped his teasing tone. He knew her well enough to know that her reasoning was fairly sound and that sometimes she had an uncanny way of leaping to the right conclusion. " What makes you think that?" he asked seriously.

" You'll think I'm silly."

To that he could not resist saying, with a grin: " Very probably. Still——"

" Well, last night when I was talking to the colonel's wife by the fireside—you know how dim the light was and I couldn't see very much, but she was wearing a huge diamond ring and every time she put a chocolate in her mouth it flashed in the firelight." She paused for breath and then went on excitedly: " And when we were standing on the wee platform place just outside the library——"

" Go on. Hurry up."

" The—the man who was trying to get in was wearing the same ring."

It took him a second or two to take this in. He stopped in his stride and looked at her. She was gazing ahead at the peat-coloured water of the swift-running river, at the little yellow curdles of foam where it eddied about the rocks, at the still blackness of the pool on the other side where she had caught a fish the other day. But though her eyes rested on the river she saw none of these things. She saw only the hand that had rested briefly on the ledge of the " skylight ".

Niall was smiling sceptically. " But lots of rings look the same."

" Yes, but it wasn't just the ring. It was the shape of the hand."

He looked doubtful. " Sounds a bit tall to me. Besides, you didn't actually see him—her. I mean, if anyone had seen a woman clambering over the Clarig roofs——"

" But she wouldn't be dressed as a woman. She wasn't last night."

" If it *was* she—he—I say, this he-she is very confusing. Are you telling me that she doubles for the colonel?"

She nodded. "That's the word I was trying to think of. They're about the same height too."

For the first time he showed some interest. "Gosh, Alis, it does begin to take shape. The colonel goes around in that foul kilt of his, makes friends with everybody, and his wife is ill in bed. She's never seen and nobody knows what she looks like. When the colonel goes off for the day, his wife, otherwise the mysterious Mr. X, dresses exactly like him in a kilt the same and does his dirty work. The colonel makes sure that the field is clear and then Mr. X pops along. They never go out together——"

"Except last night——"

"And they came by sea and it was dark. It must have been Mr. X we saw that day we were out on our bikes near Ashnish Lodge—remember he crossed the moor but didn't wait to speak to us? And it must have been him in the library—he did take a chance that day. Probably had been told they were all out and didn't expect Shona—or us!—to be around. Pretty good organizers they are, the pair of them."

"So Uncle meant what he said when he told us his man wasn't the colonel. But how would they discover the Clarig secret entrance, Niall?"

"Remember, they're not the first lot of crooks to visit here. I expect the others did a lot of spade work——"

She interrupted him sharply. "Listen, Niall. There's another thing. You remember the two men in the garage at Inverness? We've always wondered what happened to the other one——"

"And all the time she was Mrs. Donald Macdonald!" His voice rose to a high pitch with excitement. "Last thing I'd have dreamt of! I wonder if Uncle knows?"

"But, Niall, how could he?"

"Search me. But you are expected to have a spot of sense to be in the British Intelligence. All the same, I hope Uncle *doesn't* know. I'd like to see his face when we tell him."

As they came in sight of the Cottage Alison realized that she no longer felt scared and jittery—just a little excited and what Niall called "het-up". And yet, once inside, although they were both bursting with this new development, they found it unexpectedly difficult to begin their story. Indeed, they sat through supper without once hinting that anything out of the way had happened.

It wasn't till they had finished, and Mr. Murchison arrived just as they were about to have coffee, that Niall said: "Uncle, Alison and I would like to talk to you!"

"Do you mean me personally—or all of us?"

"Oh—everybody." Niall's glance included them all, including the minister.

"Nothing wrong, I hope?" said Mr. Campbell.

"N-not exactly," said Niall, and then appeared stuck. He fidgeted on his chair, stirred his coffee endlessly, and glanced rather helplessly at Alison once or twice before he said, with a half guilty smile: "I expect you know it's about the—the bloke you're after—the jewel thief."

Mr. Campbell raised his eyebrows. "From your mysterious manner, that had occurred to me."

His voice was pleasant and casual, but to Niall it sounded faintly amused, condescending almost, and Niall, who had intended beginning at the beginning with a confession about taking the car to Inverness, suddenly found himself resenting this grown-up attitude.

If he had not arranged with Alison to pass on all they knew, he would have said nothing more. He set his mouth firmly. " Perhaps, Uncle, you know already who the man is and where the jewels are hidden?"

This simple question had a different effect on each of the various people in the room. Alison was stunned with admiration at his courage in saying such a thing at this stage; Hamish, with a grave face, winked at Mr. Murchison, which gentleman was solemnly stroking his jaw; Mary was smiling at her young brother's effrontery; while Mr. Campbell's face was completely expressionless. It was as if a shutter had been drawn down to hide his thoughts.

Mr. Campbell hesitated and Niall went on: " I'm not asking you to tell us where the place is or who the man is."

The atmosphere became electric. For a minute nobody spoke. At last Mr. Campbell said: " We have a fairly shrewd idea of where the treasure is." He fumbled in his pocket for matches. " As to the crook, I know the man by sight, of course. But so far I have not come across him at Clarig."

Niall's eyes were dark and gleaming. His whole body oozed excitement. Alison, who had not spoken up till now, said quietly: " What is he like to look at?"

" Oh—tall, darkish, slim, and speaks with an English accent."

" That sounds like a description of the colonel."

" It may. But if you and Niall still think the colonel's my man the sooner you disabuse yourselves of the idea the better."

" Oh, we know it isn't the colonel," Alison said, still quietly, but with so much assurance in her voice that they all except Niall turned sharply in her direction.

"So you do, do you?" said Mr. Campbell. Once again he seemed amused.

It was Niall who replied for her. "Yes, we know who the crook is—we found out—or rather Alison did."

Mr. Campbell frowned. "You mean, you've actually seen him?" They nodded. "And spoken to him?" They nodded again.

Mr. Murchison sat back in his chair and folded his arms. "Didn't I warn you, Campbell, that if you didn't ask their help they would beat you at your own game?"

"This is not a game for children."

"Uncle!" they yelled together.

"I mean it. You're the merest infants in a game of this kind." Then he shrugged his shoulders. "Very well. Go on and tell us what you know."

"I'll begin," said Niall. "Because I'm afraid you're going to be wild about this. You see, we'd never have found out anything about the crooks at all if it hadn't been that when you were away we took the car out one day——"

"You took the what?" thundered their uncle.

"We—I—took out the car——"

"He drives awfully well, Uncle," excused Alison.

"Drives? I don't care how he drives. He has no licence. He's under age. I am appalled. I never heard anything so preposterous."

"I know," Niall said with a subdued air. "I'm most frightfully sorry. I know I shouldn't have. I'm—I'm terribly sorry."

Mr. Campbell looked furious. "Sorry indeed! I should say you were sorry. But this is a thing I cannot pass over. I shall talk to you afterwards about it, Niall. Meantime, I'll hear the rest of your tale."

Niall gulped. He had hoped that in the pleasure of hearing about the crook his uncle might have been more lenient over the car business. With the row he now knew he would get, all the kick of telling their news had gone. However, he began afresh and told how they had begun to suspect the colonel, then in fairness to Alison he asked her to carry on. Gradually the atmosphere relaxed a little. Everybody was listening intently. By the time it came to the churchyard adventure it was obvious that Mr. Campbell had forgotten about the car, and when Alison told what had happened that afternoon and about the hand appearing with the diamond on it, neither she nor Niall could have complained about any lack of interest.

There were gasps all round. Then Mr. Campbell spoke.

" I disapprove of you both being concerned in this affair. You know that already, of course. But at the same time I must congratulate you. You have—what is your phrase, Niall?—let us in on something we did not know about. We had our suspicions about the colonel's missing friend. He was traced to Perth disguised as an Admiral of the Fleet——"

There were exclamations of astonishment here from Alison and Niall.

" ——then we lost him. From inquiries about Mrs. Macdonald we frankly thought she was quite genuine. But I am sure you are right. The ring for one thing—I remember he wore it in Paris. Then his fondness for chocolates. I well remember thinking that Mr. Sandgate—that is the Intelligence code name given to our crook—must have a wonderful digestion to be able to consume so many sweets."

" Perhaps," suggested Niall excitedly, " it was he who pinched Shona's chocolates—the ones she thought Alison had taken."

" Extremely likely, I should say. I wish I had known the colonel's—er—wife was so partial to sweets."

" You never guessed that she might be—Mr. Sandgate?" asked Alison.

Mr. Campbell shook his head. " We did suspect that our man might be stowed away somewhere at Achnamara. Indeed, we were planning a search party to investigate, only last night."

" But weren't you suspicious of the colonel?"

" We checked up on him naturally but his build-up seemed authentic enough. He appeared quite genuine —even his tartan, though you mightn't think so!" Mr. Campbell smiled broadly.

" Its like was never seen on land or sea," put in Niall, chuckling.

" However," went on Mr. Campbell, " we did keep a watch on his movements."

" It looks as if detective work is a job for the young," said Mr. Murchison.

" Uncle doesn't think so," grinned Niall. " Tell us, Uncle, do you know where the jewels are tucked away?"

Mr. Campbell hesitated and the minister laughed. " You may as well tell them all you know, Campbell, or presently they'll be telling you."

" Well, perhaps you're right." He turned to Alison and Niall. " We don't know definitely but we suspect Clarig House. That place is riddled with secret passages and hidey-holes and so it might take months—years—to find just where the stuff is. But we believe it is there and, I think, so does Mr. Sandgate."

" There's nothing in the cellars under the church?" Alison asked the minister.

He shook his head. "I thought you would have guessed that by my willingness to let the colonel examine the place for himself."

"So what happens next, Uncle? Are you going to have Mr. Sandgate arrested or will you keep on trailing him till he finds the jewels?"

"I'm afraid we can't wait quite so long as that. The colonel's wife can only keep up her ladylike pretence for so long, and there's the risk that Mr. Sandgate may be spotted entering Clarig House. No, we'll give them a little longer and increase our precautions now that we have such accurate information." He smiled, and relit his pipe, which had gone out. "If nothing happens within, say, a week, then I think we'll rope them in." He cleared his throat. "You won't like what I'm going to say next, but from now on you two must take no further part in this business."

They sighed and did not reply.

"If you come on anything else important I count on you to let us know, but there are to be no more visits to Clarig House."

"But if Shona invites us?" said Alison.

"For the next few days you had better say no. Make some excuse."

Although this was what they had expected, they were conscious of a thud of disappointment. It was hard to have found out so much and then be stopped at the most thrilling part.

After Mr. Murchison left, Mr. Campbell called Niall into his small study, and Alison did not see him again that evening. After breakfast next morning she asked him how he got on.

His grin was feeble. "Poisonous. You know what Uncle's like when he's properly het-up. I got it good and hard. Wouldn't even promise to let me have a licence when I was seventeen."

" I feel it isn't fair you should have had all the row."

" Oh, well, it's over now. And it was worth it—for what we found out, I mean." They walked down to the beach. " Say, would you like to know something? Hamish was out during the night—sleuthing our Mr. Sandgate, I suppose."

" Did you hear him?"

" Don't be an idiot. Nobody ever hears Hamish. He walks on velvet. My window was rattling and when I got up to close it I saw him go out of the gate. He went along towards the boathouse—to Achnamara probably."

" I wonder if he'd tell us if we asked him."

" Not he. Uncle will have put him on his honour not to." He sat down disconsolately on one of the rowing boats. " Nothing for us to do this morning. They've told us where we get off all right. I feel utterly browned-off. It's sickening. And to think they didn't know a thing till we told them!"

Automatically she stooped and picked up the old syrup tin that was kept there, and began to bail the boat. It was a delightful morning, deliciously fresh, with the salty astringent tang of the seashore blowing softly in from the sea. Niall took up a trail of yellowy seaweed and began bursting its blobs. There had been a heavy shower earlier on, but now white fleecy clouds floated against a background of brilliant blue.

Alison straightened up and threw the tin back into the boat with a resounding rattle. " Beastly tin. It holds nothing. I've had thirty goes—all full, and look at the water that's still left."

He said nothing, but stood still, absently playing with the seaweed. The sea was astonishingly calm for a spring morning, and when he leaned on the boat the gunwale was warm. The water was gurgling pleasantly under it as it swayed gently backward and forward.

"This is the sort of day we should have bathed with Shona," said Alison.

"Don't you believe it. No bathing for me till the summer."

"It's such a heavenly morning. Let's take one of the boats and go away somewhere for the day."

"Where to?" He spoke moodily, and she could see that he was still thinking of what might have been happening to-day at Clarig House.

"Anywhere you like. What about the Island—we could add a stone to the cairn. We haven't been yet these hols."

"Oh, well," he said listlessly, "if you like. I don't mind."

There was a loud coo-ee from the house and they stood up to see Mary waving. "Alison! Telephone!" she called.

"It's Shona," said Mary, as they tore through the garden. "She wants you both to go and spend the day with her, but Uncle thinks you might ask her here instead."

"We thought of having a picnic on the Island."

Mr. Campbell came through the hall. "Excellent idea! Ask Shona to join you."

In the background Niall's face grew steadily longer. Obviously they were expecting some excitement up at Clarig House and it would be convenient to have himself and Alison well out of the way. He frowned while Alison went through to the cloakroom.

Shona sounded a little peeved. " That you, Alison? What an age you've been. My hand aches holding this thing."

" Sorry, Shona. We were down on the beach. We're going for a picnic to the Island."

" But didn't Mary tell you I wanted you to come here for lunch *and* tea?"

" We'd have loved to come." (Shona could not guess just how true this statement was.) " But it's such a gorgeous day, don't you think it would be fun to row to the Island——"

" Not particularly. I think it would be more fun here and I've asked Sallie——"

" Well, bring her with you—do, Shona. We could take both boats."

" I'd rather fish," she said obstinately.

" It's not a very good fishing wind to-day. I heard Hamish say so."

" Oh, rot," said Shona rudely. It looked like a deadlock, then Shona said decidedly: " I think you're being very sticking, Alison Campbell. I always give in to you and Niall. But for once I shall do as I please."

Niall, who was at Alison's elbow, gave a smothered giggle, and Alison said: " All right, Shona. I'm very sorry. I wish we could have come——"

" You just don't want to——"

" Oh, Shona, it's not that. But we had fixed to go to the Island." She sighed. " Won't you change your mind and come with us?"

Shona seemed to hesitate. She hated to say No to any of the Campbells' suggestions because in the end they always managed to have more fun than she did, but she was annoyed that they had not preferred to spend the day with her. So she said crossly: " No, I won't. You can go to your old Island!" and banged down the telephone.

"She's not coming," said Alison somewhat unnecessarily to Niall.

"Thank goodness for that."

Alison went out to the garden where Mr. Campbell was doing a little gardening. "Do you think we might borrow your field-glasses for to-day, Uncle? These awfully good ones—that you don't have to twirl round to focus——"

"In other words, the only decent pair I have—the pair I never lend. However, you can have them—they're in the top drawer of the chest in my room. But be careful of them."

"Oh yes. Thanks terribly, Uncle," she said, halfway to the house.

"Is Niall there?" called Mr. Campbell, and at that moment he appeared. "I want to warn you that when you get to the Island you must land on the inner side—the tides are apt to be treacherous at this time of year."

"Okay, Uncle."

"And I think you'd better take the big boat. It's safer if the sea rises."

Niall smiled ruefully. "We've just baled out the wee boat, and the sea's absolutely calm."

"It may be just now, but remember this is April, not August. Anyway, take the big boat. And don't forget your oilskins."

As they carried the stuff down to the beach Niall said: "Uncle really is the limit. All these rules and regulations before we get away. You'd think we'd never handled a boat in our lives before. I felt like saying we'd just stay at home——"

Coming down behind them, Hamish heard his last words and said: " I know you're both a bit browned-off this morning, but if it's any consolation to you I don't think you're missing anything at Clarig House to-day. Our friends at Achnamara always make careful inquiries before they take any risks, and they're not likely to do anything when the whole family are at home."

" In that case," said Niall, unsmiling, " I don't see why Uncle couldn't have let us go and spend the day with Shona."

" And what hope could you have had at discovering anything with everybody there?"

This was so true that Niall said: " By the way, any luck last night?"

" I don't quite get you."

" Oh, why pretend, Hamish. I saw you go out."

" Does Lord Peter Wimsey never sleep?"

" You don't seem to, anyhow," retorted Niall. " It would be so much more matey if you let us in on what you're up to."

" It would certainly be easier to do that than cope with all your questions. But I will tell you this. I saw nothing. And nobody. So—are you any wiser?"

As they rowed down the coast their deep depression began to lift. On a morning like this it was hard to be anything but happy. The sea was dimpled by a faint breeze, the sun was pleasant and not too hot for rowing. Niall was rowing stroke while Alison followed his lead a trifle erratically. As always she was fascinated in the various landmarks they passed—each one reminded her of some adventure she and Niall had had.

Niall turned round with an impatient click of his teeth. " If it's America you're making for, just carry on as you're doing. Unless you do a little work we'll be blown clean out to sea."

"Sorry, Niall." She was well aware of her own deficiencies in not watching what she was doing and she bent over her oar with a will.

It was a long row to the Island, and by the time it came in sight they were both flushed with their exertions. They stopped for a minute to look at it, with the fringe of rocks round it and the cairn on the top that had been begun when Mr. Campbell was a small boy, and which was now so high that you could see it distinctly from quite a distance away.

"I always feel as if the Island really belonged to us," she said.

"Because of the cairn, you mean? Yes, I do too, in a way."

They began rowing again and found that, with that brief stop, they were considerably farther away from the shore. "I say—pull hard your oar. The tides *are* jolly strong here. We'd better keep well inshore." They pulled to the landward side of the island and Niall neatly manipulated the boat into a small cove. "This will do. It's quite sheltered here."

Between them they carried the picnic things ashore and then, going in opposite directions, they went off to search for wood for the fire. Alison went northwards, but when she turned the headland and went seaward the force of the wind nearly pushed her back again.

She came back and dumped her load of sticks beside Niall, who had got the fire going. "I hope that's enough. There's a terrific gale round there. Do you think while we're waiting for the kettle we should climb the cairn?"

"I do not. The kettle won't take long and I'm starving. Pass that chunk of wood."

They sprawled on the rug and had their lunch.

Kirsty rather specialized in making up lunches, but to-day she had surpassed herself.

" Super!" said Alison, tucking in to salmon sandwiches.

Niall grinned. " Judging by what we've got here, the family must be having a fast day. Let's see that chocolatey thing you were talking about."

When they had finished they staggered against the wind up the hillside and carefully added two stones to the cairn, but the wind up here was so fierce they could hardly stand upright and Alison's hair flurried about her face like a curtain.

" Isn't the cairn getting big?" she panted, but Niall turned his back. " The earth interests me more than any cairn to-day—come on down." But when she made to take the usual path he caught her arm. " This way—it's a short cut," and led the way down the face of the cliff. It was covered with bracken and dotted with boulders.

" It's awfully steep," she objected.

He grunted. " Oh, come on. Everything's steep to-day. We were silly to come for a picnic by ourselves."

" But we often have."

" I know, but it's different in summer when you can bathe and footle about on the beach. You need more than two for a picnic at Easter. You want to keep doing something."

She did not reply. She knew quite well that it wasn't just the picnic that was making him fed up. She herself felt the same. And almost as if he knew what she was thinking he said: " I almost wish we hadn't said anything to Uncle last night. I think he might have given us a chance to do something more. Now we're simply dished. Nothing exciting——"

She gave a sharp cry. " Oh, Niall !" and he turned quickly to find her sprawling on the hillside with one leg out of sight. " I think I've fallen down a rabbit hole !"

" Really, Alison, you are awful—you *never* look where you are going."

" I do. This was hidden by the bracken."

" Have you hurt yourself?" he asked a trifle belatedly. " Better rest for a minute."

" It's not too bad," she said, rubbing her leg as she gradually freed it. " But there's quite a big hole there. It goes down a long way."

" It wouldn't be much use to a rabbit if it didn't."

" I don't mean down longways, not straight down—down the hillside." She thrust a hand inside. " I'm not sure that it is a rabbit hole—look !"

He dragged aside the bracken. " It *isn't* a rabbit hole. Queer-looking thing. There's some loose stones inside." He dragged one out and then another. " You'd almost think they'd been pushed in purposely."

Alison was more concerned with her leg, which she kept rubbing. But he lay flat on his tummy with his arm as far inside the hole as it would go. He removed several more stones, then exclaimed excitedly: " Listen, Alis—there's something else in here. Not stone. More like metal. It's stuck. Is there nothing we could poke it with. If only we had a golf club." He kept working away at it and then gasped: " I think I've got it. There's a kind of knob thing—I daren't leave go. Do you think you could drag me backwards—catch my ankles."

Reluctantly she began tugging, trying to pull him away from the hole, but it was so windy standing here she wished he would leave whatever it was and let them go back to the shelter of the beach. "You're terribly heavy!"

"One more pull—harder—oh, put some guts into it, Alis!"

Then with a tremendous heave she dragged him back and with him a small box made of lead. He was puffing a little. "If it hadn't been for this handle business I couldn't have managed it."

They squatted on the hillside and examined the box. It was not more than six inches long and less in width and depth. It was roughly but stoutly made and it was fitted with a lock. All at once they both glanced up simultaneously. The same idea had occurred to them both.

"Niall—do you think it could be——"

His eyes were dancing. "We can't open it here. Let's take it down to the beach and see if we can prize it open."

But among the picnic gear they had no instrument strong enough to make any impression on the box, and although they tried various sharp stones they were no use either. "Must be something valuable in it or it wouldn't be locked," he said.

She interrupted him with a warning shout. "Oh, Niall! Here's the colonel's boat—look!"

He stood up, looking where she pointed, and there, rounding the northern tip of the Island, sailing towards them was a trim little yacht. Its brasswork glistened in the sunshine, it was painted in various shades of green camouflage, and it was smoothly approaching the little cove where the Campbells' own boat was moored.

Like lightning Niall turned to Alison. "Quick! The box! We've got to hide it—what'll we do with it?"

CHAPTER XIV

Marooned on the Island

There was no time to think or plan. The box had to be put out of sight immediately.

" Cover it with your blazer—anything," Niall said urgently, " and I'll go down and meet them and see if I can shoo them off to the other side of the island."

Alison was gazing intently at the yacht, that was now not forty yards' distant. " Mr. Sandgate is there too. I can see him beside the colonel."

He grinned at her, worried though he was. " ' From her eyes I did receive fair speechless messages!' " he quoted, and moved off down the shingle. As usual, this sort of situation that made her so panic-stricken was the very thing he revelled in.

As the yacht came closer he waved to the colonel, who could be seen at the tiller. " Hello, Colonel! Are you coming ashore?" And he sounded as if there was nothing that could give him greater pleasure than the company of the colonel. " It's pretty shallow here—the best anchorage is round the other side. We always land there when we have the motor boat."

" It's pretty stormy there." The colonel seemed to hesitate. " But we'll go and have a look at it."

Niall tried not to sound too relieved as he said: " Right-oh. And if it's too rough you can always come back here."

As the yacht sailed on he returned with a leisurely step that Alison admired. In his place she could not have helped dashing up the beach. He was glancing around him as he came. " That should give us time. Now—where's the best place to hide it?"

The beach seemed suddenly devoid of any cover. Alison pointed to the basket that had held the sandwiches—now empty. " How about this? We could stick something over it——"

" Here's my scarf!" taking it off as he spoke and tucking it and the box inside the basket. " That'll have to do—keep it beside you." He was off again. " Got to cover up our trail so that if they do wander up the hill they won't find the cache sticking out a mile."

He had barely gone, and she was gazing aimlessly across at the mainland, when something caught her eye —a quick movement of a man, she thought. She reached for the field glasses of her uncle's, looked, and then looked again to make sure. For the figure she saw was Hamish. She glanced behind. Niall was out of sight and the yacht had not yet re-appeared. She had a sudden longing to let Hamish know they were here. She reached for her oilskin and waved it furiously. But when she looked through the glasses again she saw that Hamish had not seen her. His back was towards her. She glanced around again desperately. She *must* attract his attention. She dropped the oilskin and, cupping her mouth in her hands, she gave the family S.O.S.—the thrice repeated cry of an owl.

Again she scanned the mainland with the glasses and this time he was returning her wave. She sighed with relief. If the treasure really were inside the box, then with help so close at hand they must not take any risks. Hamish would know what to do once he saw the yacht.

She tucked the glasses inside one of the picnic cases. It would never do for them to be discovered by the colonel or—worse still! by Mr. Sandgate. She was not a moment too soon. Neither was Niall. He had barely reached the flat surface where the picnic things were spread out when once more the yacht came sailing round the north end of the island.

" Back again, the blighters," muttered Niall. " They must be going to land."

" Did you manage to close up the hole all right?"

" As best as I could. I stuck some extra biggish stones against it for good measure. Unfortunately we had tramped down the bracken rather badly. Now look here, Alis," he said seriously, " our plan is to beat it off the Island at the double. They're not *likely* to hunt for the box while we're here, but if they did, and they found the place had been robbed—well, there's no saying what they might do. Another thing, we mustn't separate, you and I, nor leave the picnic place."

" Of course not." Her knees were uncomfortably wobbly. They could not get away quickly enough to please her. " I'll start packing up. Listen, Niall, Hamish is over there on the mainland—I saw him through the glasses."

" O-oh! So it was you who gave the owl call?"

" I hope you don't mind, but I hate the thought of you and me alone here with these two men. It seemed a chance to let Hamish know."

He nodded gravely as they watched the yacht come inshore. " I'm glad you had that much sense. I don't feel too happy myself, and there's no one I'd sooner have with us here than Hamish." He went down to the water's edge. " Shall I come out for you, Colonel?" he called.

" Thank you, we'll manage. We have the dinghy," he replied. Alison fancied he did not sound so cordial as usual.

In a few minutes the yacht was anchored and the two men stepped ashore from the dinghy, and Alison said timidly: " Was it too stormy on the other side, Colonel?"

" Blowing half a gale." This time there was no mistaking it. His voice was definitely rough.

" Sorry, sir," Niall said innocently. " Afraid that was my fault."

" I'm afraid we've had our lunch but I'll see if there's any left," Alison said politely.

" It's all right. We have some with us, thank you." He turned to the man who had followed him from the boat. " Harry, these are the young Campbells I told you about; this is my friend, Major Black."

As they shook hands Alison braced herself to look squarely at Mr. Sandgate. As he gave a short military bow she could see no resemblance whatever to the colonel's " wife ". " How d'you do," she murmured shyly.

" Rough seas you keep in this part of the world!" The minute he said that she was reassured. She could not mistake that voice.

" It seems to have blown up very suddenly," said Niall, unobtrusively pushing the basket containing the box behind him as he sat down. " It was quite calm when we rowed along, but I was just saying to my sister that perhaps we oughtn't to stay much longer. It's a long pull back."

" You'll be all right, I dare say," said Mr. Sandgate, fixing them with his keen eyes and a cold smile that reminded them both of Guy, and made Alison think of

Niall's quotation: " one may smile and smile and be a villain ". " And what brought you along here to-day?"

Niall smiled. " Nothing else to do, I suppose. And we always come to the Island at least once every hols. We climb to the cairn and add another stone."

" Mm! So you know it very well."

" It doesn't take much knowing, sir, really. It's so small. We picnic here in summer and the bay at the other side is super for bathing."

Involuntarily Alison shivered, and Mr. Sandgate said: " Shouldn't you put on your blazer if you're cold?"

But her blazer half covered the hiding-place for the treasure box so she said hurriedly, trying not to look in that direction: " I'm not really cold but I'll put on my oilskin."

She spoke awkwardly and, noting her hot cheeks, Niall said: " Well, Alison, perhaps we'd better get cracking."

But they were not to escape so easily.

" Before you go, tell us something about the Island, won't you?" said Mr. Sandgate. " Any points of interest we can explore?"

Alison was carefully buttoning up her coat and did not look up, and even Niall hesitated before he said coolly: " Depends on what you are interested in, sir. A lot of seagulls nest on the shore though it's early for that yet."

" I fear the only interest we have in birds is in shooting them," replied the colonel briefly.

" Perhaps you're keen on r-rock f-formation," Alison stammered nervously.

Mr. Sandgate smiled, but not with his eyes. " It's more the history of the place we mean."

" Then there is something we can tell you," said Niall, smiling. " You know, there used to be wolves in this part of Scotland and the people brought over their dead friends to be buried on the island so as to protect them."

" And have you ever come on any of the graves here?"

" Oh no," they said, in genuine surprise, and Niall added innocently: " We never thought of looking. We're always doing other things—bathing—or eating—or just fooling on the beach." But he was not quite so poised as he appeared and he began rolling up the rug. " Sure we can't leave you any of our eats? We could give you the kettle if you wanted to make tea—it wouldn't take long to start up the fire again."

" We have all we need, thanks," said the colonel.

" Then if you don't think it rude of us to run off——" He smiled at Alison, who had picked up her blazer and the basket behind it. " We'll carry our stuff down to the boat."

It took one or two trips before everything was in, then Alison and Niall called out their good-byes. He pushed off the boat and, with one leg swung over, added cheerily: " See you soon, I hope."

The two left on the shore returned their good-byes in a way that was civil but hardly friendly, and Alison took up the oar with a sensation that was very nearly happiness, so thankful was she to be safely away. Knowing how sound carries over the water, they were careful not to speak, but as they got beyond the shelter of the island Niall turned his head sharply. The sea was squally and flecked with white, and there was a curly line of foam just ahead of them.

" Gosh! The wind has changed—it's right against us. Thank goodness we left when we did."

She turned, and beyond the calm waters caught a glimpse of an angry sea. The sky was still blue and the sun still shone, but there were patches of green among the grey sea. " It looks awful, Niall."

" Oh, we'll make it all right. At the worst we can always land on the mainland."

" I thought Hamish might have come to help us."

" He probably would if he'd had a boat."

" Niall," she said sharply, " did you bring the box with you?"

" The box? What box?"

" *The* box. In the basket. Covered with your scarf and my blazer."

" 'Course I didn't. I thought you were bringing it. My goodness!" Already he was turning the boat. " How could you forget it, Alison?"

She felt like saying: " How could you forget it yourself?" But this was no time to argue, so she said unhappily: " I don't know. I was in such a hurry to get away."

Already they had turned the boat and Niall's eyes were fixed on the island. " The basket's still there—pull as fast as you can. Funny—I don't see any sign of the others."

" Can they be hunting for the treasure? Niall!" she exclaimed suddenly, " is that what the word 'grave' meant? Not the churchyard at all?"

He stared at her, then his face cleared. " Golly! Of course. That's it. Don't know why I didn't think of it. But that's what brings Mr. Sandgate to the island to-day."

They were back in calm waters now and it was a matter of moments for Niall to land and rescue the precious basket. One hasty glance told him that its contents were still intact. As he came aboard Alis said: "Quick! I think they've found the hiding-place. I can see their heads showing above the bracken."

He took the oar she handed to him. "Pull hard, for the love of mike. We mustn't be here when they find the treasure has gone. I say—don't look, but they're coming back down the hillside now. They're waving. Pretend you don't see them and keep rowing hard. Steady now. Don't panic." For her strokes were becoming quick and erratic.

Alison studiously kept her gaze towards the mainland, though she was aware that the men were trying to attract their attention. Then Niall exclaimed: "They're coming after us!" Only then did she permit herself to look to the island, and, sure enough, they were stepping into the dinghy.

"What'll we do, Niall?"

"Don't stop rowing," he said firmly. "If we could come on some shallow water I'd drop the box overboard." He peered down, but it was deep here and the mainland at least a quarter of a mile away.

"I can see them boarding the yacht now," she said.

"It looks as if we're for it. What a fool I was to bring the box! We should have hidden it in the bracken or somewhere. I don't know what I was thinking about. Isn't this too awful to find it and then have to give it up without a fight."

She looked distressed and glanced again at the mainland. There was still no sign of Hamish. "Shouldn't we just sink it, Niall?"

He looked stubborn. "No, I'm dashed if we do!"

"How would it do," she said timidly, "if we managed to stick it under the bottom boards?"

He stared, then gave an excited chuckle. "Alis! You've said it! Can you get it out of the basket without stopping?"

"I think so." Panting, she grabbed it from the basket, unwound the scarf, then removing a bottom board pushed the box underneath. "Shall I put a box or something over the board?"

"Yes. No—wait. Leave it as it is. It's less suspicious like that."

"I can hear the chug of their engine." But she avoided glancing in their direction of the island, and so she gave a genuine start of surprise when the yacht suddenly came up alongside. "O-oh!" she said breathlessly, "I didn't see you."

Niall, keeping the nose of the boat into the wind, also managed to appear surprised. "Oh—hello, Colonel! Going back already?"

Mr. Sandgate put his hand out and held their boat. "We wanted to talk to you. We think you may have something we are anxious to have."

"You don't mean the sandwiches, do you?" As he said it, Niall felt that his humour was slightly misplaced.

Apparently Mr. Sandgate thought so too. He fixed them with a steely stare. "We do not mean the sandwiches. We visited the Island in order to fetch something but it is no longer there."

"Bad luck," murmured Alison, but her voice gave out hardly any sound.

"What is it, sir?" Niall asked politely.

"I think perhaps you know already."

"But—but if we had anything of yours we'd hand it over at once."

"Would you?" the crook said deliberately.

"Of course we would."

" It sounds very well but I am afraid I don't believe you."

Niall went very white but he said nothing. The man went on: " Consequently I am afraid I must search your boat."

" But—but why?" said Alison, and meeting these terrifying eyes she echoed Niall. " We haven't anything that belongs to you."

" What did you go back to the Island for?"

" We forgot one of our baskets—this one."

Mr. Sandgate turned to the colonel. " You hang on here while I go aboard her, and you,"—looking at Niall—" grip this rope and keep alongside."

It struck both the Campbells that this last injunction—to prevent his falling into the water—was distinctly cool, and before he did as he was told Niall said with dignity, squaring his shoulders: " If you insist on searching the boat we can't prevent you. We are helpless against you, of course. But my uncle will be furious when he hears."

To this the only reply Mr. Sandgate made was: " Hold on here."

The next few minutes were agonizing. Niall stared ahead with a set face. Alison too, though with great difficulty, kept her eyes away from the bottom boards. Perhaps the worst moment was when Mr. Sandgate came on the field glasses. He was not to know they had once belonged to a member of his own gang! But without examining them he put them back in the basket. Alison gazed passionately at the mainland. *Where* was Hamish?

The search was over *and the bottom boards had not been touched*. Considering their relief, it said a good deal for the Campbells that they kept expressionless faces as

Mr. Sandgate stood up and looked from the one to the other. His eyes had become pinpoints of baffled rage. There was now no pretence of courtesy. His mouth was so tightly closed that his lips had almost disappeared. Inside her oilskin pockets Alison's hands were tightly clenched. Only pride prevented her from crumpling up.

Both she and Niall were certainly unprepared for the crook's next move. Reaching up to the bow, he disentangled the anchor from the wet rope and handed it across to the colonel. "As you are so fond of the Island we'll tow you back there," and as he spoke sprang neatly back to the yacht again.

They sat with impassive faces as they were towed behind the green yacht, and did not even exchange glances lest they might give something away. In a short time they were once more at the little cove, and as the yacht slowed down Mr. Sandgate pulled the Campbells' boat alongside, saying to Niall: "Pull hard ashore." And as the boat grounded on the pebbly beach, "Pass over your oar, will you?" he said, addressing Alison.

Too surprised to do anything else (and in any case she could not have refused), she removed it from the rowlock and lifted out the dripping oar.

"You will now be able to continue your picnic which we so unfortunately interrupted." He took the oar from her, dropped the anchor with a splash into the water, and before they could reply the yacht turned and sailed off to the north again.

They sat transfixed in their boat. The bumping of the boat against a rock brought them to life again. "The brutes!" exclaimed Niall as he edged the boat into shallow water. "What can we do with one oar! We're marooned here for the rest of the day."

" Never mind, they didn't find the box. That's the only thing that matters."

" I bet they're feeling pretty sick. They must know now that their visit to Clarig is all for nothing. They must realize that if we haven't the treasure somebody else has—the hidey-hole is empty. If you ask me, they will beat it from Achnamara right off before anything leaks out about what they've been up to."

" So that's why they made sure we couldn't get back to give a warning."

" It's so maddening. If we could only have got away we could have—I mean, Uncle could have nabbed them as well as the box. Meanwhile we kick our heels here with nothing to do but wait till somebody comes for us. Surely Hamish can't be so long." He peeped inside one of the baskets. " Lucky we didn't give all our leftovers to the gulls."

They kept moving, chiefly because it was too cold to sit still, and every now and again they would train the glasses to the mainland. But nothing could be seen. " I can't think what has happened to Hamish," he exclaimed impatiently.

" Of course he's not to know we're minus an oar. If he saw the yacht leave he'd think we'd be following on behind."

The afternoon wore on. They had finished the remains of the food long ago and so they were both chilly and hungry. As they huddled close for warmth Alison said: " I feel like the Babes in the Wood."

" Or the Princes in the Tower."

" Listen!" Her sharp ears had caught the sound of a motor engine, and they got to their feet and looked anxiously northwards.

Round the point came a freshly painted motor boat. " Alis! It's the *Clan Campbell!*"

" Cheers! It's Hamish!" she shouted, and they ran down to the rocks, and by the time the *Clan Campbell* drew near they were already in the boat and Niall was pushing off with his one oar.

" I thought you'd be home ages ago," Hamish said, as soon as he could be heard.

" They pinched our other oar—the colonel and Mr. Sandgate."

He did not seem unduly surprised. " Oh, they did, did they? Well, pass over the other one, Niall, and if you give me the anchor I'll make it fast here—we'll tow her behind. Now hop aboard the pair of you and all your bits and pieces. And let's hear your tale."

Already Niall had removed the bottom boards and Alison had the box tucked under her arm. " Do you mind if we begin at the wrong end of the story?" Hamish was busy with the rope and did not glance round. " Any end you like."

" You tell him, Alison."

" No, you. It was you who found it."

" What on earth are you two squabbling about?"

They both began speaking at once, and only after Hamish put his hands in his ears did Niall begin a more or less coherent account of what had happened.

" We thought you were never coming, Hamish," said Alison.

" If it hadn't been for your warning call I shouldn't have been here as soon as I was. But when I saw the green yacht arrive I guessed the gangsters meant business."

" But how did you come to be there—opposite the Island?" asked Niall.

" I have a story to tell you too. That magazine with the pencilled writing on it that Niall saw—the one that referred to Clarig House and the graves, and I had also seen it by the way—we thought as you did that the grave part meant the church or the churchyard. It was only this morning that Uncle remembered that the Island had once been a graveyard too, so he decided we must keep the place in view."

" Had Uncle any idea where the stuff was hidden?"

Hamish shook his head. " As he told you last night, he considered Clarig House was the most likely place. There are so many passages and the smugglers used it constantly. Uncle was on watch this morning near Achnamara, and when he saw the yacht go off to the south with both crooks on board he thought it looked like business."

" Wasn't Uncle afraid they were leaving for good?" asked Alison.

" He might have thought so, but Rab had a message from his friend at the garage in Inverness, just after breakfast. Apparently the colonel had rung up Duncan to ask if the garage could be kept open till midnight to-night, as he and his friend would call for the car they had left there, and they wanted it filled up with petrol and oil and made ready for the road. By that we knew that either they had found the stuff in Clarig House or were pretty sure they could lay hands on it to-day."

Here Hamish handed the wheel to Niall and moved beside Alison. " Uncle sent me in the car to keep an eye on the yacht from the mainland. Mr. Murchison was posted on the moor that lies just behind Clarig House, Rab was guarding the junction of the Achnamara road and the hill road, and Uncle—after he saw them sail away—went to Chiarmhor to make some arrangements with some Scotland Yard men who have been, as you might say, living underground there. Here I should perhaps explain that though we appeared to be visiting the Macleods at Tigh-an-eas pretty often, we mostly went no farther than Chiarmhor, reporting progress—or rather usually reporting no progress!"

"Was it not a bit risky for Mr. Sandgate to telephone instructions to Inverness?" asked Niall. "Didn't he guess the line would be tapped?"

"He did," Hamish said drily. "Before he came to Achnamara he left instructions with your friend Duncan in a sealed envelope, and all he said on the telephone this morning was: 'Open that letter and carry out the orders.' Then when Duncan had read it he rang up Rab." He smiled. "That is one more detail that Uncle will have to thank you two for."

"Tell me, did Sir Angus never suspect that Mr. Sandgate was prowling in and out of his house?" asked Alison.

"Sir Angus is an unsuspecting person. We did think of telling him but he has a strong dislike of being mixed up in any police matter, though if the treasure *had* been found there we should have had no choice."

Niall grinned suddenly. "I bet Shona would have given her ears to have been with us to-day. But go on, Hamish. What happened after you saw the yacht leave the Island?"

"Well, I dashed back to the car, and she took so long to appear round the next headland I thought they had fooled me."

"That would be when she towed us back," said Alison.

"Then when she did come I carried on, keeping her in sight all the time. When I was sure she was making for Achnamara I went inland, picked up Mr. Murchison and then Rab. Uncle, I knew, would already be waiting for us at Achnamara. We parked the car so that it was hidden from the house and from the sea, so when our two gentlemen came ashore and came through the front door there was quite a company to greet them. Uncle had his men there, all ready. The minute the door was closed the crooks were surrounded—I just wish you two could have been there. It was a bit exciting when they both tried to draw guns——"

"Guns!" Alison and Niall said together.

"Yes, guns. They are both crack shots, and that was one reason why Uncle wanted you kept clear of any possible trouble." As he spoke Alison remembered the colonel's "wife" saying: "My husband is an excellent shot." "We soon found they had not the treasure with them. They were not allowed to get beyond the hall. Their rooms had been searched earlier but they were too wily to leave anything behind."

"And where are they now?" asked Niall.

Hamish shrugged his shoulders. "En route to London, I imagine."

"I *wish* we'd been there," said Niall, but Hamish shook his head. "You could not have played a more important part anywhere. You nabbed the prize from under their very noses."

CHAPTER XV

Planning another Midnight Ploy

They reached the Cottage just as the supper gong went, and after dumping the picnic stuff in the hall they went along to the dining-room, where Mr. Campbell and Mary and also Mr. Murchison were already seated. Unobtrusively Alison placed her blazer, which was unusually bulky, on a chair near the door.

" Timed it well, haven't we?" grinned Niall.

" We were looking for you earlier," said Mr. Campbell, " but you were at least on the stage of the last act of the drama even if you did not have a chance to play any part in it." They kept their eyes down and said nothing. " I don't suppose you are sorry now that I refused to let you go to Clarig House to-day?"

" Oh no, Uncle," they said together, and Niall added: " though we wish we could have been at both places—especially when the crooks got back."

" Hamish will have told you they have gone off without the treasure. A pity from our point of view that they did not find it, but——"

" Is it very valuable?" asked Alison.

" Worth a king's ransom—eh, Campbell?" put in the minister.

Alison looked at Niall. Niall looked at Alison. And they both realized they could not wait any longer. " Uncle——" began Niall excitedly. " Alison, fetch your blazer and show them what we've got."

With her eyes dancing she carried over the crumpled blazer. " It's a surprise for you, Uncle."

He raised his eyebrows, perhaps not too pleased that he had been interrupted in his discussion of the jewels. " A surprise?"

She smiled at Niall, then, like a conjurer who is about to pull a rabbit from a hat, she whisked away the blazer and laid on the table before him the small metal box. " Niall found it. I—I slipped down a rabbit hole and it was inside."

" Will somebody please explain?" asked Mr. Campbell helplessly.

" We hope it's the treasure," Niall said, with unusual modesty.

There were gasps of astonishment from those not in the secret. " I was struck dumb too, Uncle, when they told me," said Hamish. " We don't actually know yet what's inside, but you could perhaps prise it open with this." And he passed a sharp tool across the table.

" Didn't I tell you they'd beat you in the end, Campbell?" said the minister, putting an arm round Alison's shoulder.

" You always take their side, Murch," complained Mr. Campbell, struggling with the lid.

" It's coming," said Niall, his voice quiet with restrained excitement.

But the lid remained fast and Mr. Campbell handed the box over to Hamish. " You'd better do it—you're the engineer of the family."

Skilfully Hamish prised it open a little way. " No use asking Alison to finish the job—she hasn't the strength; but "—grinning at Niall—" as this is your box, so to say, you can add the finishing blow."

Niall took the tool in his hand. A little pressure and the box was open. There was a chorus of " ohs " and " ahs ", for under a top layer of folded paper there were packed precious stones of every imaginable kind and colour.

" Wait a minute," said Mary, bringing out a clean teacloth and spreading it on the table. " We'll empty them on this and you'll see them better."

Nobody spoke, but their eyes were fixed on the sparkling array of jewels—diamonds, rubies, emeralds, sapphires—all spilled out in a shining scintillating mass. Then at the bottom of the box, wrapped up in cotton-wool, lay a string of small beautifully matched pearls. " These alone would be worth your king's ransom," said Mr. Campbell to the minister.

" Where have they come from?" asked Alison.

" I should say they are the result of one famous Continental jewel robbery. No wonder the gang was so anxious to recover them. Look well at them, all of you, for you are not likely ever to see so much wealth concentrated in so small a space."

" I thought there was some gold as well," said Niall.

" I had hoped there would be. Very probably it has been spent long ago." Alison and Mary were trying on rings and bracelets, and Mr. Campbell smiled as he waited for them to hand them over. " The sooner I have these safely stowed away inside my safe the happier I shall be. And meantime "—beaming benignly over his glasses at Alison and Niall—" I shall have to think of some way of expressing my indebtedness to you two."

" Indebted is an awfully cold word, don't you think, Campbell? I think this calls for some sort of celebration here and now. Plan something important later if you like, but couldn't we do something this very night?"

Everybody looked at Alison and Niall. "I can't think of anything," murmured Niall.

"How would you like to throw a party—ask Shona and her uncle and her mother, and Sallie and her people?" asked Mary.

"To-night, you mean?" said Alison.

"Yes, why not? We could have Rab along to play the reels—we could all help to clear the lounge, and Kirsty and I could raise something for supper out of the food cupboard."

"Sounds smashing," said Alison, but her voice lacked conviction.

Niall made a noise like "Mm!" which might have meant anything. Then Alison said: "Do you mind if I say something to Niall?" And reaching up on tiptoe she whispered in his ear.

He backed away. "You're tickling me. I can't hear you." Then when she repeated it he exclaimed: "Gosh! Yes! That *is* an idea! Mary—Uncle—you know how Alison and I have always wanted to fish the Clarig during the night and you'd never let us go alone?"

"Which is not to say you've never done it," said Hamish, under his breath, winking at Niall.

"How would it do if we threw a river party—a midnight fishing competition?" said Alison, jumping up and down. "All of us here, and Shona if she'd come."

"I bet she'd come," said Niall. "No use suggesting Sallie. She's not keen enough. But we could ask Rab—and Donald—and even daft Colin if you like. We could arrange sides——"

"And then," exclaimed Alison, her excitement rising to a climax, "we could all come back here—and have a sort of breakfast—about two o'clock in the morning."

" A good slap-up meal," put in Niall.

" Bacon and eggs would be heavenly."

By this time all the grown-ups had collapsed on their chairs and were laughing helplessly. " Commend me to my family for original, not to say inconvenient, ideas. How do you feel about it, Murch?"

" Nothing I'd like better," replied the minister promptly.

" I knew it," said Niall, grinning.

" Of course it depends on Sir Angus. After all, it's his river. But if that's really how you want to celebrate I'm sure he won't object."

Niall broke in: " Just one thing, Uncle. No matter how late we sit up to-night, nobody is to say to Alison and me that it's time for bed."

" Niall," remarked Hamish solemnly, " I take off my hat to you. You think of everything."

Presently Mr. Campbell called from the hall: " Sir Angus says that will be quite all right, and Shona would like a word with you, Alison."

Alison picked up the receiver. Shona's voice purred with pleasure. " Say, what a brain-wave that is of your uncle's. Yes, of course I'm coming. The others aren't, though. Uncle says he'd rather have his sleep."

" I wish he'd been coming."

" Do you? I don't. Uncles are always a bit stodgy—I don't mean yours, of course, but I can't be bothered with grown-ups. It's not the same fun when they're there." She broke off giggling. " Oh, sorry—have I put my foot in it? What time are we starting off, Alison?"

" About midnight, I think. Doesn't that sound super? Hamish will come up in the car and fetch you

—and of course when you come back with us you must stay the night."

"That's super. I'd love to. I know what beat of the river I'm going to have—Peaty Pool."

It was Alison's turn to giggle. "Not this time, Shona. We are going to draw lots."

"Hm! What cheek! Whose river is it anyway!"

"Did you have a nice time with Sallie?" Alison asked, to change the subject.

"Just middling. Sallie can't fish—not properly. How did you get on at the Island?"

"It was rather fun. We had a bit of an adventure. We got stuck on the Island. The colonel and his friend pinched one of our oars."

"I'm sure the colonel would never do a thing like that."

"Well, his friend did. They thought we had something in the boat belonging to them."

"And had you?"

"Of course not. But they sailed off and left us, so we had to wait till Hamish came and took us home in the *Clan Campbell*."

Shona sighed. Once again the Campbells had had an exciting day while she had had a boring one. "Pity I hadn't come with you," she said.

But Alison laughed as she put down the receiver, thinking how lucky it was that Shona had not. "Poor Shona!" she said to Niall, who was at her elbow.

"She can't see that if she didn't think quite so much about impressing people she would have a much better time."

"She can't really help it, I suppose. And when she's nice she's terribly nice."

He made the obvious reply. " And when she is bad she is horrid! Still, after being friendly with us for a bit longer she may be bearable." And he went off, whistling, to look out some casts.

By a quarter to twelve they were all ready. Hamish had gone to Clarig House to fetch Shona, and Alison and Niall stood at the door listening for the car. It was a lovely night. A soft wind was blowing in from the sea—" a fine fishing breeze ", Niall called it—and a young moon made a golden crescent that peeped over the tip of Ben Chiarmhor. The stars twinkled like fairy dancers, and there was just enough light to distinguish the hills beyond the glen and the dark smudge of trees beside the river.

Every minute or two there was a boom as the waves zoomed up the beach and a breeze whispered through the bushes in the garden, and the evening air had brought out a faint perfume of early wallflower. Alison sighed happily. This was the Clarig she loved. The adventures that she and Niall seemed to stumble into were fun and madly exciting, but an expedition like this with the family was the kind of adventure she liked best. Already the affair of the colonel and Mr. Sandgate seemed less important than it had done an hour ago.

Down through the hills came the echoing whine of the car.

" Here they are," said Niall. " Now mind you keep up the credit of the family and don't let Shona put a fast one across you."

" If you mean a fast fish, I don't mind whether she does or not. It's the fun of going out at midnight that I get a kick out of."

He picked up his rod and recited dramatically:

" 'Come, gentle night; come, loving, black-brow'd night.' "

" It's Shona who'd be black-browed if she could hear you."

He had swung his haversack over his shoulder and was already out on the path. " Come on," he said, grinning, and added irrepressibly: " 'Make haste; the better foot before.' "

She giggled. " Oh, Niall—really!" And still laughing, she went down the steps after him.

10797